

Prayers for Women, Dominoes for Men: Gender and Power in San Francisco de Macanao, Venezuela

Patricia C. Márquez,
*IESA POBA International*¹

During the summer of 1990, Amadeo Salazar died in San Francisco, a small town of two thousand people on the Macanao Peninsula of Margarita Island, Venezuela. Seventy years old, Amadeo was a beekeeper, an owner of tough cocks, and a well-known political figure on the Macanao Peninsula. After the funeral I went to his house to give my condolences to his wife Modesta. It was a Saturday evening, and the outside of the house was crowded with tables (borrowed from the local bar) where men were playing cards and dominoes. As I entered the house I noticed there were many women and young children I knew. They were sitting around as if waiting for something to happen. The women of the house offered me some coffee and invited me to participate in the prayers for the soul of Amadeo. Without knowing it, I was about to engage in a Margaritan wake.

A Margaritan wake is carried out, night after night, for fifteen days after a burial. Each evening, I returned to the Salazar's house, and each evening the patio was crowded with women and little children waiting for eight o'clock to come in order to participate in the first set of prayers (the second set began at ten o'clock). Often when I entered the living room, many women had come early, already choosing their seats. The older women, surrounded by flies attracted by the candle lights, sat close to the altar, while the younger women sat by the wall. Young girls sat wherever they wanted until the older women pushed them out. The female relatives were either in the kitchen preparing coffee and *guarapo de Santa María* (a type of tea) or sitting elsewhere.

The Margaritan wake consists mainly of prayers. Every night, two middle-aged women alternated the leading of prayer sessions. With loud dramatic voices, each created a characteristic rhythm with their prayers to the Savior, the *Virgen del Valle* (Virgin of the Valley), the doors of hell, the soul of the bereaved, and others; the remaining women responded in a chorus with similar prayers. When I first began to experience the wake, I was nervous. It was intimidating to sit in a room full of women repeating prayers in unison while expressing themselves through their bodies and their voices. Often then, I was silent, not knowing what prayers to repeat, and I listened to both the prayers and the sound of domino chips being thrown on the tables outside the house. At almost every session, I saw older women use "dog face" expressions to reprimand women who had brought their badly behaved children to the prayers. I also noticed how women whom I knew did not like each other struggled with one another to show their mastery of the prayers. Perhaps most interesting, however, were the ways in which women began talking about daily life immediately after the prayers as if they had not been ardently praying to the soul of the beloved Amadeo only minutes before. They talked about issues such as marriage, cooking, gardening, soap operas, health, men and other local gossip every night.

¹. P.O. Box 02-5255, Miami, FL, 33102-5255

In the celebration of wakes it is apparent that women and men belong to different social networks. First, they are spatially separated. While women remain inside for prayer, male relatives sit outside playing dominoes with other men from the community. Except for some occasional joke shared between men and women, the two sexes remained physically apart and seemed very comfortable with members of their own sex. Second, the wake seems to serve different functions for different genders. For women, the ritualized prayer of the Margaritan wake provides a site for subtle power battles between women in the community. It is here during the wakes that women find ways of expressing themselves within the limitations and opportunities imposed by the ritual. In addition, the wake provides a way for women to interpret daily life. When the prayers end, women come together to gossip and interpret daily life; afterwards, they proceed to play cards with each other. Finally, the wake provides a site where women, despite their disagreements, find comfort and support amongst each other. Outside the house or in the kitchen, women show obvious bereavement, but the celebration to honor the soul of the deceased also seems to be a joyful, perhaps even therapeutic event for women. In contrast, for men the wake seemed to be used as an opportunity to socialize. A young man called Pelicano echoed the sentiments of many other men on the peninsula when he described the wake to me as a type of party where men played dominoes and cards while joking and talking. Pelicano saw the wakes simply as an opportunity to get together with his friends and to have a good time.

According to Olsen (1982), in the sexual segregation expressed in different domains of action for women and men, the former find certain freedoms denied to women in "non-sexually-segregated societies." This paper will examine how San Francisco women of different generations interpret what it means to be a woman in everyday activities in the context of segregation, and how they deconstruct and reconstruct notions of gender while living in what appears to be a hegemonic patriarchal system. The objective is not to romanticize gender resistance, but to demonstrate that in San Francisco, women are not merely subordinated to men but are active within particular spaces in the transcript of a Venezuelan patriarchal ideology.

The opening images demonstrate many aspects of the celebration of a Margaritan wake in the town of San Francisco. In this place, hidden in the foothills of the Macanao mountains, women pray while men play dominoes. The wake reflects the existence of a gender segregation beyond the realm of labor. What is more, this informal segregation demonstrated by the wake entails the existence of unique female and male networks which are almost impenetrable to the members of the opposite sex. This type of segregation at wakes is, of course, not unique to San Francisco (McCorkle 1954, Brandes 1981, Danforth 1982). Indeed, segregation in San Francisco not only occurs at particular events such as wakes, but also is part of everyday practices and daily discourse.

What is the meaning of this gender segregation? Is it merely imposed by men to assert domination? Is it imposed by the dogma of a patriarchal system limiting the conditions of life of the people in San Francisco? Or are women engaged, through segregation, in constituting their own subjectivity in being a particular kind of person?

Gender segregation has often been explained in terms of the subordination of women (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, Bourque and Warren 1981). Furthermore, in some cases, female segregation has been understood in terms of women operating in spheres which are undervalued in their societies. Scholars have often proposed oppositions such as public and private, and

formal and informal spheres (Rosaldo 1974, Ortner 1974, Reiter 1975). Considering that gender is a cultural construction in flux within a historical context (Ong 1986: 4), such oppositions are not completely useful in the examination of segregation and networks in women's everyday practices in the town of San Francisco. Oppositions such as subordinate/dominant, public/private, and informal/formal tend to skew any understanding of gender dynamics, and to gloss over critical differences in meaning attributed to gender segregation.

What is of interest here is to understand the processes and purposes that create unwritten gender segregation in this community.² In this case, it is necessary to look at what sort of things gender networks either allow or do not allow to happen. Then, in order to comprehend segregation and networks in San Francisco three main set of questions emerge. First, what sorts of events are created and maintained through segregation?; second, what concepts of gender identity emerge out of practices in relation to networks and segregation?; third, what are the dialectical relations between practices of segregation?; fourth, how do these relations allow an understanding which they do not necessarily articulate but are articulated?; and finally, since San Francisco is not only part of an island undergoing rapid changes, but also of a larger, dynamic world, what is the impact of change in relation to a larger socio-cultural (national) system?

The Relativism of Subordination

The subordination of women is often addressed in the literature on "Third World" women. Bourque and Warren (1981), in their study about women in two Andean communities in Peru, define subordination as, "not simply a status or a social state . . . it is the product of social processes and structural relations between men and women . . . While subordination need not be collectively perceived or understood by its victims, it is categorically imposed by larger social processes" (1981: 48).

Bourque and Warren's definition of subordination is dynamic and takes into account the hegemonic system affecting people's lives. However, as they proceed with their analysis of subordination, Bourque and Warren appear to propose universal criteria, based on degrees of sexual hierarchy and parity, to measure the subordination of women. Their categories are problematic since they believe it is possible to speak comparatively of the women in one society being more subordinate than women in other societies or communities (1981: 48). This approach to subordination establishes an unclear relation between women's subordination to men and their institutions in the two villages of Chiuchin and Mayobamba, and gender subordination through larger processes (such as access to health care, education and law) existing beyond the village.

In San Francisco de Macanao, both women and men are part of a larger system. The people in this community, like those in Chiuchin and Mayobamba, are subordinated to the conditions of life which impose limitations on what both women and man can do. For example, many people in San Francisco do not pursue further studies after high school due mainly to the long distances, the lack of transportation, and the economic pressure to work. It is often the case

2. By unwritten segregation I mean that, unlike in parts of the Islamic world, segregation in San Francisco de Macanao is not part of the written law or religious codes.

that few unmarried women have a better chance of continuing their education since, depending on the circumstances, their work is not considered as important for supporting the family.

The degree of subordination in these societies will not emerge by the determination of a sexual hierarchy by a social scientist, or by contrasts based on sexual parity. The subordination of women, just as that of any human being, exists, but what is considered subordination is subjected to the projection the social scientist makes of her own society. Looking at women through the lens of subordination can lead to fiction or to fixing relationships that are dynamic and contested. Subordination in Bourque and Warren's argument perpetuates the idea that women are always in positioned more precariously than men. In San Francisco, daily activities can range from taking care of the home to fishing for several months on a boat. Therefore, it is important to question the context and the criteria by which subordination is measured.

Power and the Myth of Male Dominance

Confusion concerning the ways in which women are subordinated to men within a particular community, as opposed to a larger patriarchal system, has led to the discussion of diverse forms of power available to women. Literature on diverse forms of female power such as informal, symbolic, domestic, and reproductive power, is extensive. Many notions of women's power in different communities has led to the conclusion that perhaps men do not truly dominate or have absolute control over women.

Rogers, for instance, recognizes the extent of women's power by arguing that male dominance in some peasant society is a myth. The myth of male dominance is expressed, "In patterns of public deference toward men, as well as their monopolization of positions of authority and prestige" (1975: 729). Roger believes the myth of male dominance exists in peasant societies "... to maintain a non-hierarchical power balance between the categories, male and female" (Ibid.: 746). For the author, men and women recognize the myth in order to maintain their own power, that of women being explicit in the domestic sphere. She admits, however, that there are societies, like hers, where male dominance is not mythical (Ibid.: 749), implying that peasant societies are isolated from global hegemonic forces.

Rogers' "myth of male dominance" is an attempt to break away from the idea of women's subordination at a local level.³ However, it does not recognize that even in so-called "peasant societies" male dominance does not come simply from the power being exerted by peasant men on women. Male dominance refers to a particular order of things, perhaps patriarchal dogma, which is not just particular to a village. Localizing male domination and perceiving it as a myth shows two things. First, women are not merely subordinated to males in their societies or even to the system, for they are able to exert power through particular tactics which shape and reshape gender constructions. Second, restricting the analysis of male dominance to the local level fails to address the relationship between male dominance and hegemony.

³. A critique of Roger's argument has been presented by Harding (1975).

The confusion is thus between, on the one hand, men as agents of male domination, and, on the other, the patriarchal ideology acting on both men and women. This confusion seems related to a lack of understanding of the complex relation of hegemony and patriarchy.

Power and Resistance

In examining the "powers of the weak," Janeway (1981) looks at resistance as the survival techniques that people employ to oppose tyranny. According to her, women do not plan for the future because their oppression allows them little opportunity to say much about it. Janeway thinks that the lives of women in different societies in historical contexts, "make up a dictionary of survival techniques" (1981: 210) such as avoidance of shock. Along the same lines James Scott proposes to look at the "weapons of the weak," studying everyday forms of peasant resistance. In this case, the Malay peasant of Sedaka counter dominant groups, such as those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes and interest from them, by symbolic manipulation expressed in acts such as dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, feigned ignorance and gossip (Scott 1985).

These works shed light on the ways in which resistance manifests itself in people's everyday lives. For Scott, peasant resistance in Sedaka is the struggle maintained by social actors in the theater-like stages of village life. However, neither Janeway's nor Scott's arguments about the relationship between power, which they see as dominant forms of social and economic control, and resistance, which they perceive as individual and collective acts involving symbolic manipulation, are convincing. Each falls into what Abu-Lughod (1990) terms, "the romantization of resistance." She argues against looking at resistance "as signs of the effectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (1990: 42). Abu-Lughod's suggestion is to look at resistance as a diagnostic of power.

In analyzing forms of resistance among Bedouin women, Abu-Lughod perceives the working of the power relations in which women and men are enmeshed. She reverses Foucault's notion: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power" (1978: 95-96) saying instead, "where there is resistance, there is power" (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42). However, Foucault's assertion that, "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978: 93) further problematizes the use of resistance as a diagnostic of power. In this case it might be more useful to turn to hegemonic forces exerted by dominant groups, forces which are interpreted at certain level by those subordinated to them.

Both Foucault and Abu-Lughod agree that power takes many forms, and that the network of power relations are interwoven, forming a dense web. As Abu-Lughod points up, "If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people at other levels" (1990: 47). In this manner, how is one supposed to distinguish between the different forms of power? If resistance is a diagnostic of power, what distinguishes it from power? What is the relationship between power and resistance? If power entails both resistance and hegemonic forces, how is one to look at everyday practices and distinguish between the three? How do we talk about relationships between forms and acts of power? Is there are way of linking points of resistance to other than particular power structures?

When faced by a traffic inspector a woman in Venezuela might be able to avoid a fine by crying, acting innocent, or charming the officer (almost always a man). A man might be able to escape payment by either intimidating or bribing the inspector. Then again, neither the woman nor the man might be able to get away without paying the fine. Are these examples of local gender actions to avoid a fine? Or are they forms of power that men and women possess to handle the system? If these are gender-specific powers, how can they be measured or even defined when the consequences are not always predictable, for "the weak must continually turn to their own end forces alien to them" (de Certeau 1984: xix). Whatever women and men in San Francisco can win with tactics to take advantage of dominant notions of gender expectations, they cannot keep. They must constantly manipulate events "in order to turn them into 'opportunities'" (Ibid.: xix).

The points at which power becomes resistance depends on how the researcher decides to interpret those terms as analytical categories. Resistance is not exterior to power, as they are implicated in each other. The point is that power and resistance represent two faces of the same coin. Distinguishing between the two to comprehend gender constructions and manipulations in practices of everyday life is a matter of perspective. The reasons for choosing to think in terms of one or another must lie in their usefulness in understanding gender relations. In this case, resistance is useful to understand the significance of women's networks and segregation in San Francisco de Macanao.

San Francisco de Macanao

In order to relate the theoretical discussion to ethnographic specifics, it is necessary to contextualize San Francisco de Macanao within its national setting. San Francisco is a town of approximately two thousand people on the Macanao Peninsula of Margarita island (OCEI 1992). The island is located twenty miles from the northeastern coast of Venezuela, and together with two smaller islands forms the state of Nueva Esparta. There are two sides to this island, the eastern side, which is currently being exploited as a big tourist center, and the western side which is the Macanao Peninsula.⁴

The island of Margarita has been in contact with other people since pre-conquest days, when the native Guaiqueri Indians of the island were exposed to people from the mainland. Since the advent of the first Europeans in 1500 the people from this island have interacted with them. Until recently, the main channel of communication with the larger world has been through the sea. This implies that men who went fishing to other regions were the ones who had more opportunities to come in contact with other people. However, a bridge connecting the peninsula to the eastern side of the island was built in 1963 facilitating interaction among other people.

Major changes occurred on the peninsula in 1971, when it was declared duty free. In 1974 it was also declared a free port. This has meant a great increase in population.⁵ Since then, other Venezuelans, Italians, Arabs, Spaniards and others have been developing commercial

4. This western side was described by McCorkle who did his thesis research in the fifties as, "... sparsely inhabited and of slight historical importance" (1954: 1).

establishments. Consequently, in the last ten years Margarita island has suffered from the malaise of rapid and uncontrolled development.

On Being a Woman

In trying to understand the meaning of gender segregation I asked Goyita, a forty year old woman from San Francisco, the reason why only women prayed at wakes while men played dominoes. After she had been talking for a while, Romulo, her oldest son, impatiently interrupted her, "Men don't pray because they are men." I asked Romulo just as impatiently, "What does that mean?", to which he replied, "Aren't you a woman?"

Obviously, coming as I do from Caracas, the capital city, there were impressions about being a woman I did not share with the people in the Macanao Peninsula. The meaning of Romulo's answer puzzled me as much as it can puzzle the reader. In San Francisco the concept of "being a woman" (*ser mujer*) also differed among women, especially among those of different generations. It appeared too, that many attitudes and behaviors, even the most trivial ones, were explained by gender categories; e. g., "I am a woman." For example, when during my field work in San Francisco in 1991, I found that Mari, a fourteen year old female whom I had met several times in school was always at home. When I asked her why she was out of school she said, "because now I am a woman." This response stopped me from asking more questions, since a more obvious reason seemed to be that her mother wanted help with her other nine children. The questions are then: How are women shaping the concept of "woman"? What purposes and processes are involved in the ways in which the concepts of "being a woman" are applied in their everyday practices? And finally, How do definitions of being a woman differ among various women?

Different Generations

One weekday afternoon, Humberta Marin was running down the path to her *conuco* (plot of land). I followed her, watching as she pointed out her tobacco plants, her husband's goats, and the ways she could still jump over the small river beds. Behind us was her twenty year old daughter Chela who occasionally complained about having to walk all the way to the *conuco*.

Humberta talked with delight about working the land, all the while showing me many of the plots around her. Most of these plots belonged to the older women. Right next to her plot was that of Sofia, her mother. In her *conuco*, Humberta grew papayas, melons, other fruits and vegetables, which she sold locally. Also, in one side of the plot there was a small shack that had she and one of her ten children had recently built. There, she took her breaks and met daily with Sofia who, despite being seventy-five years old and toothless, still cultivated her plot. According to Humberta, the two of them were best friends, feeling there are many things one can not converse with men. Humberta talks about her problems and illnesses with Sofia because she says, "*Me da pena contarle eso al hombre*" (I am embarrassed to tell that to the man).

5. The population was 75,899 in 1950, and by 1981 it had increased to 250,000 (OCEI 1992).

For many of these women of an older generation, to be a woman is defined not only in terms of having a man and children. To be a woman is in part related to a natural environment; that is, to work the land, to catch iguanas, or to get honey from the mountain. Part of being a woman is to assert your space outside the home, and to be able to have your own shack or a plot of land as a "room of your own." The older women are proud of hard physical work, and most of them boast about their strength and their good health. Even older women who now stay mainly at home love to describe their energy, associating it with their diets (especially honey and tea of local herbs called *bebeizo*) and with hard physical work. The older generation of women grew up close to each other in an environment they describe as "difficult and austere."

Chela, in contrast to Humberta and Sofia, went to grammar school. She and her sister Lela are the ones responsible for washing, cleaning, and doing most of the cooking. Despite Humberta's complaints about the melons rotting, neither of them is interested in having anything to do with the *conuco*. The daughters prefer to spend their free time watching *telenovelas* (soap operas) on television. At the same time, Chela and Lela say that there is not much else to do when they get bored since their parents do not let them go out.

For the older generation there appears to be a closer bond between mothers and daughters. In the past, the mothers would watch out for their daughters' experiences such as their first menses and pregnancies. As Juanita, another older woman, told me: "Before, the mothers looked at the daughters' clothes and then would go and ask them if 'this and that' had happened to them." Then, the mothers would talk with their daughters and the bond between them would grow closer. Now she says, "*la gente no cree en eso*" (people don't believe in that). According to the older generation, young girls learn "those things" in school, with other friends, or through the television.⁶

Since the bridge and a paved road were built in the early sixties, connecting the Macanao Peninsula with the rest of the island, an ever-changing concept of womanhood has been and continues to be transformed. For younger women, the female network is also changing. The bond between mothers and daughters is not as powerful. Women of the older generation have a vertical mother/daughter network revolving around activities outside the home, where women can talk away from men. The younger women's network appears to be more oriented toward horizontal friend/peer networks and revolving around the school, the wage-workplace, and/or the home.

6. More data is presented on older women because talking to them was easier than talking to younger women. Often when I went into households the older women tended to dominate the conversation. When I asked questions to younger women they answered them with short answers and waited for their elders to elaborate upon them. Perhaps also the fact that I gathered more data about the activities and conversations of older women has to do with my own particular interests. I found myself more willing to listen to the stories about the history of the place, agriculture, hunting, and healing practices than those about fashion, television, cosmetics, cooking and finding a husband.

Caution has to be exercised when examining the relationships between different generations and women's definition of "being a woman." Older women can see themselves and define "being a woman" very differently from the ways in which they would have done it in the past. Perhaps it is only in old age that the mother/daughter bond is strengthened, and in that the past their network was also of horizontal nature. However, women of all generation share the realities of gender segregation. In many events such as the pulling of beach seines, holiday celebrations, parties, funerals, and Sunday cookouts (*sancochos*) that involve members of both sexes, women gather, talk and share activities mainly with other women. At these events involving the community women shape appropriate roles, such as praying at wakes instead of playing dominoes, in ways that are culturally consistent with definitions of "being a woman." The meanings of "being a woman" form a female domain of action and determine women's relationship to male domains. Through clearly defined social networks, women experience the freedom of resisting power men could exercise over them. Segregation, as in the case of the wake, allows for the manipulation of the limitations imposed by the larger system of which they are a part.

Older and younger women's different definitions of themselves as women, however, are related to shifting interests of the dominant patriarchal system. As Ong (1987) suggests, particular demands in women's modes of production involve the production of subjectivity making a particular kind of person. Women involved mainly in subsistence agriculture develop another kind of subjectivity than those in industrial labor or the home. San Francisco women after the sixties have a lot more contact with people beyond the Peninsula since it is easier to go to the other side of the island and the mainland. That is not to say that women in the past were isolated from the outside world. The exigencies of production brought by the contact with the larger system confront existent subjectivities, which share different understandings of being a woman. It is in the clash of gender constructions in the shifting webs of agency and power that women engage in constituting their own subjectivity.⁷

Quarrels and Conversations

McCorkle has described the lives of people in a long gone town near the capital of Margarita island. He noticed that, "Quarreling at Bella Vista was almost exclusively confined to disputes between women. These disputes usually arise over small sums of money or over imputations of unchaste conduct" (McCorKle 1954: 174).

This kind of quarreling has been understood to be a vital part of a set of strategies used by women to achieve their own goals (Lamphere 1974). According to Lamphere, women quarrel with each other when it serves their best interest (1974: 112). Her perspective presupposes that in those societies where quarrels occur among women, they are dominated by men. Her argument does not distinguish clearly male dominance by men from male dominance from hegemonic forces of the larger system of which those societies are a part. There is no explanation

7. Ong explains that even if Malay factory women did not question the overall male dominated system, they still engaged in constituting their own subjectivity through resistance (1987: 193).

about how such strategies develop; one is left to assume that they come from women's individual creativity and awareness of personal goals. However, what Lamphere calls the "unassigned" (1974: 99) power of women does not reside in acts such as withholding food or sexual favors. It manifests itself in those acts, but I argue that it lies in the interpretation and reshaping of the meaning of "being a woman."

In San Francisco, quarrels and conversations reflect more than individual strategies for personal gain. Women's quarrels and daily conversations not only represent forms of establishing individual positions, but are also a way of experiencing "being a woman." It is partly through quarrels and conversations of everyday life that women maintain segregation from men; it is through them that women keep the system of networks functioning. Conversations and quarrels exist in a cultural, social and historical context shared by the people in San Francisco. That does not necessarily mean that, "... skills of verbal finesses and subterfuge are a function of, and an adaptation to, women's subordinate and dependent position with regard to control over resources" (Harding 1975: 293). The context contains constraints of the patriarchal system; life, however, is more complex than that. Those skills come from subordination and dependency, but also from interactions and experiences that women have with men such as love, friendship, and working relations.

At the wakes the women of Macanao Peninsula listened to my problems and anxieties and sometimes created new ones with their solutions; at the same time, I heard some of their troubles and many of their stories. At those wakes I became aware of the importance of conversation in these women's lives. In a wake I attended, Rutila, a woman in her early forties with five adult sons and two little girls told me about a pain in her breasts that she had not told anyone else about. She explained to me that she could neither tell her man (meaning her husband) nor her boys about it (the girls were too young to understand) because "they do not know about women's things" and would unnecessarily worry about it. She then grabbed my hand and made me squeeze her breasts to feel where the pain was. She assured me that it was fine to do so (and I assumed it was since the other women in the room did not seem to even notice it), saying, "Patricia, there are no secrets between women, everything must be known among them."

This is an example of how women have broken some of the taboos existent in the culture. In this case, a woman cannot talk with men about a pain affecting sexually charged parts of her body; therefore, she talks freely to another woman. Neither Rutila nor Humberta feel comfortable talking with their husbands about many things, but they do with their female friends and relatives.

Conversations are also used in San Francisco to protect women from men. One day I was invited by Jose de la Cruz, a fifty five year old fisherman, to pull the beach seines to the shore. When I arrived at the beach at around seven o'clock there were several people waiting to start pulling the ropes. Recognizing one of Jose de la Cruz's sons, I sat down next to him and two other men. Almost immediately Juanita, a sixty year old woman, came to my group talking and joking, inviting me (dragging me?) to sit with the other women. As we pulled the seines I noticed that Juanita would not stop talking to me, especially as I got closer to a heavy man holding the end of the ropes. Every time I got to the end, the man would flirt with me, and quickly Juanita would say in a joking manner, "What would she want with you? You are too fat." Juanita was trying to protect me from his advances. Unlike me, she knew that he was one

of the richest and most powerful men in the town. Her "weapon" (if such a thing exists) was to engage in conversation with me, and to let the man know that she was not going to let him get away with his comments. Her conversation was based on things that women do and know. Her jokes were told in ways that older women joke. Neither her conversation nor her jokes allowed any space for men to approach me.

Like Juanita, most of the women use conversation as a protection against vulnerability. Talking and quarreling women establish their territory, hold on to their men, and protect themselves from men. If a woman gets beaten by a drunken husband, for example, the woman will scream and talk until everyone knows about what her husband does. Her female relatives will talk about the events until pressure is exerted on the man to modify his behavior or on the woman to leave the man.

Quarrels among women are also common in San Francisco. Some quarrels involve women from different towns, and they are often related to men. In the Macanao Peninsula fights over a man occur when he has several women in the same or nearby towns.⁸ If a woman is attached to a man who has other women, she will talk and scream to establish her territory around her man. Fabiana, a young woman, would always tell me how she would pull the hair out of any woman who dared to flirt with Felicio, her man. The first few times she mentioned it I did not pay much attention to it. The vehemence of her threats seemed to imply that she was worried about Felicio's fidelity. As I talked to other women who did similar things and witnessed a fight between two women sharing the same man a different pattern emerged. Slowly, I realized that Fabiana saw me as a messenger of her willingness to fight for Felicio. She knew that I was always visiting the different towns of the Macanao Peninsula.

Looking at a Spanish village, Harding concluded that the lines of women's conversation were limited to work related to women, gossip, and stories (1975: 296). The conversations of the women in San Francisco partly take such forms, but to say, as Harding suggests, that this is all that forms women's scripts presents only a partial view. "Women's script" encompasses other realms related to their community and outside world, ranging from politics to magic. Contrary to Harding's conclusion, women *do* break down the structures that frame them through talking. Through conversations and quarrels women are reshaping their own subjectivity of "being a woman." The conversations and the quarrels are culturally consistent with definitions of themselves as women, and it is through them that women deal with different fields of power relations.

Women in San Francisco de Macanao handle power in very complex ways that involve negotiation, manipulation, and narratives. They, as members of social networks different from that of men, develop gender-specific tactics that permit them to manipulate events. This does not mean, however, that such negotiations and manipulations can be reduced to "resistance" against male power. San Francisco women's domains of action occur within a historical and spatial context which is part of a more complex system of events.

8. This is what I call an unrecognized form of polygyny. Only the wife is recognized by the law, but the other women involved see themselves as wives with certain rights.

Conclusion

To understand gender relations it is necessary to keep in mind the relativity of analytical categories such as women's subordination, male dominance, power, and resistance. Whether power or resistance are perceived in the gender segregation that exists in San Francisco de Macanao depends on the perspective that is chosen. The complexity and relative nature of these categories hint at the difficulties of relating theory to sound ethnography on gender. Portraying women as subordinated to men or as living in subordinate spheres presents only a limited view of gender relations. To view women's everyday practices and choices as emerging out of subordination, male domination, and resistance does not encompass the complexities of life. Such views often do not portray that which can not be placed within these categories. They gloss over relations between wife and husband, brothers and sisters, fathers and daughters, men and women which involve cooperation, affection, love, and magic.

Perhaps, it is necessary to move out of present discourses on gender. At that point it will be expected that the voices and views of many women and men will be considered to be as relevant as academics. Instead of understanding their words as reflections of perspectives which the researcher must explain, scholars may understand these words as explanatory. When the women of San Francisco explain what it means to be a woman and how that beingness is experienced, they might be providing a framework to understand gender relations which we cannot see because it differs from our own.

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