

Changing Gender Roles?: A View from 'Beyond the Rural'

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Introduction

Due to the often-isolated nature of Bajo communities, there is only a moderate amount of research conducted about many aspects of their lives, including the interplay that exists between daily roles and activities of men, women and children. The majority of literature on the changing roles of women is based in a rural or urban context often exploring changes that have occurred as a result of a modification in their life-course such as employment or economic change. My research will add to current gender debates by considering changes that are occurring to and by men, women and children in a society that 'goes beyond the rural'¹ namely the Bajo community of Sama Bahari, commonly known as Sampela. Causative factors of change have to either be imported into the society or result in an internal transformation of thought or ethic. Conclusions that are derived from such a unique isolated community could be used to explain the initial drive and impetus behind changes that are occurring in rural settings.

Literature Review and Background

Sampela is a Bajo community that is located off the island of Kaledupa, in the Wakatobi Marine Park, south-east Sulawesi. The Bajo are an indigenous group who used to be truly nomadic and lived and worked on small sailboats. They settled in stilted house communities over the reef flats approximately 60 years ago and kept many of their traditional ideologies. The Sampelan community satisfies the three criteria of the United Nations working definition on isolated and marginal populations being regarded as an 'indigenous population' (see Burger, 1987:6). As such they have preserved almost intact the customs and traditions of their ancestors. As very little research has been conducted on 'indigenous populations', the below review of literature may not be directly applicable to the Bajo, but is related to the research in general or the aims that are being explored.

The allocation of tasks are often attributed along the lines of gender with men undertaking heavy physical tasks and women being associated with repetitious or time consuming tasks, and those that are located close to the home (Momsen, 1991). Women in rural communities still do almost all the collecting of wood and water and are responsible for most of the social and religious duties (Momsen, 1991) including animistic based offerings to the sea to 'ensure' good catches for their husbands. The main role of Bajo men is to fish. Although women rarely work as fisher people they are often involved in net making and the preparation and sale of the catch (Momsen, 1991). Women conduct activities that include cooking, gleaning and looking after their children. If agar (seaweed cultivation) is an activity that occurs in the household, women often perform joint roles with the men in tying the agar onto the lines and then form the main labour force in harvesting the crop (Harta and Dahoktory-Naga, 1996).

Bajo families are rarely nuclear, and often three or more generations all live together or at least in close proximity. The confines of the community often lead to families becoming inter-related via marriage leading to extensive social and support networks for both men and women. The number, age and sex of people in networks can impact on the roles and activities that women conduct, especially if there are a high number of female children within the network. Definitions of household or residential unit are difficult to apply due to many people all cooking and eating together, the basis of standard definitions (see Evans, 1992). It can therefore not be assumed that all activities/roles that are undertaken by Bajo women are for the collective good of their household.

The traditional belief system of the Bajo is animism, a belief that inanimate objects possess spirits that can be appeased by spiritual offerings. The spirits can be called upon to heal the sick or secure a good

¹ When discussing 'going beyond the rural', I am referring to the complete detachment of the society away from the land with access being separated by the sea.

catch at sea. Islam is the main religion of Indonesia and as such a Mosque has been constructed on Sampela as part of the State infrastructure. The emergence and spread of Islamisation and the attendant problem of women have raised important questions regarding modernisation, eurocentrism and cultural specificity (Moghadam, 1994). As Bajo men accept and adopt Muslim beliefs this impacts on the roles that their wives are expected to play. Potentially their roles would also increase as men would have to find time for set prayers and religious observance, a characteristic that does not exist with animism.

Migration can occur for a number of reasons but is commonly associated with employment. Both men and women migrate but the reasons for migration, the type and of destination and the length of time spent at the destination are often gender specific (Momsen, 1991). Return visits from migrants bring new ideas into traditional rural areas (Momsen, 1991) which can heighten aspirations and have an impact on household members perceptions.

A result of male out-migration may lead to a change in the headship of a household. The household economy may be effected depending on the duration of time spent away from the community and whether remittances are being sent home. When men migrate, leaving their wives and families behind in rural areas, the rural economy is affected. Women who head rural families have a heavy burden of work and have little time for leisure (Momsen, 1991). However, households headed by women are not undifferentiated and should not necessarily be seen as victims of development. In some cases women choose to establish their own households in order to gain decision-making independence. Many such households function both successfully socially and economically (Momsen, 1991).

The family, and particularly the young family, has played a leading role in the explanations of women's subordinate position (Katz, 1993). It is the belief that the lack of birth control to adequately space children puts extra pressure on women and impacts on the roles that they have to perform. The introduction of a family planning programme in the community 4 years ago by a local NGO has had a positive uptake (personal communication) and as a result leads to smaller and better planned families. Although there will be less work for the mother to do in the present (i.e. looking after young children), there will be less children to support her in her old age which could potentially increase her burden in later years.

Community participation and education are commonly perceived to be low amongst rural women. The World Bank Policy Research Report (2001) explains how schooling of girls is considered a threat as it takes girls away from work and care activities at home and provides them with aspirations beyond their reach. It goes on to suggest that when girls reach adolescents they are generally expected to spend more time on such household activities as cooking, cleaning, collecting fuel and water, and caring for other children. A change in such perception (brought about by exposure of parents to foreign cultures) will not impact on their roles but also on their children's future generations. Increases in empowerment such as education could lead to economic and political empowerment.

Existing changes and differences between women adds to the inequality that women face and as such impacts upon them. The levels of change in Sampela can be linked with surrounding Bajo villages such as Laho (considered to be more subsistence based) and Mantigola (considered to be more modern in its approach) to predict future changes and assess the impacts that the changing role of women in Bajo societies will have.

Objectives

The objective of the research is to examine how and why the roles of women in a Bajo society are changing, and assess the impacts that this may have on the surrounding community in the present and the future.

Themes that were explored to examine the changing nature of gender roles included:

- An examination of men, women's and children's roles within the household and family structure. This explored the type and allocation of labour activities inside and outside the home and the effect that family and social networks have on such roles. It provided a critique of current roles and activities performed by men, women and children to provide an indication of change.
- An in-depth assessment of causative factors of change. Causative factors of change include religious/cultural beliefs (change from traditional animistic beliefs to the adoption of Islam), the effects of migration within the family (leading to the importation of culture, 'globalized living' and a change in aspirations and a change in household

headship), the impact of a family planning programme and mechanisms that can increase self-empowerment of women (such as community participation, education or economic activity).

- An analysis of the effect that the changing roles have on the household and wider community. Evaluating how changes have influenced daily activities of the household (relating to decision-making and participation) and the wider impacts this has on the Bajo community.

Methodology

A triangulation of methods was used to extract the relevant information needed for the research. Informal semi-structured interviews comprised the bulk of my data collection and this information was verified by participant observations and focus group discussions. The majority of the data set was collected in Sama Bahari, a Bajo community located adjacent to Kaledupa in the Wakatobi Marine Park. In addition, interviews and observational work was collected in the neighbouring Bajo communities of LaHoa and Mantigola (also located around Kaledupa).

The strata of the population that were interviewed were determined by the relevance to the study and the sample size of those interviewed was a broad reflection of the social groupings in Bajo Sampela. Different interview themes were aimed at different strata of the population with the general theme of 'gender roles' being common to each. The type of interview and sample size of each are detailed below.

- Household interview – 50 interviews completed (25 houses – male and female respondent each)
Interview aimed at highlighting the differing perceptions of men and women's roles by the male and female person in a family. The male and female were interviewed separately.
- Young Adult Interview – 25 interviews – mixed sex
Interview aimed at ascertaining the future aspirations of young adults in Sampela and comparing these to aspirations of their parents. Perceptions of gender roles by a younger generation were also determined.
- Migration Interview – 25 + 2 interviews – 26 female and 1 male
To establish the causes of migration and determine the desired outcome. A change in roles of the women was also provide in the time of absence of their partner. Support networks were also examined.
- Widow (and husband remarried) Interview – 10 interviews – mixed sex
Interviews looked at how roles had permanently changed for people due to death of a partner or them remarrying. Support networks were also examined.
- Elders Interview – 10 interviews – mixed sex
The Elders provided a oral history of change in the community, in some cases, noting changes that had occurred since when the Bajo lived in houseboats.
- Longitudinal Interview – 45 interviews – all female
To provide an examination of changes over a small timeframe, people that were interviewed in June/July 2002² were re-interviewed providing an element of longitudinal research.
- LaHoa Interview – 6 interviews – mixed
Indicative comparison of gender roles in a neighbouring Bajo community.
- Mantigola Interview – 6 interviews – mixed
Indicative comparison of gender roles in a neighbouring Bajo community.
- Community Interviews : Kepala Desa, PPK (Government) Women's Group, Religious Leader and Government School Representative
Interviews providing an additional insight into causative effects of change.

Focus groups were organised to allow for a discussion on relevant themes related to the research. The focus groups are listed below:

- Women's Focus Group – 1x5 people and 1x 6 people
- Men's Focus Group – 2 x 5 people
- Female Young Adults – 2 x 5 people
- Male Young Adults – 2 x 5 people
- Children Drawing Focus Group – 10 participates, 5 boys and 5 girls
- Operation Wallacea/Bajo Yayasan Matilla Staff Focus Group – 5 participants – mixed

² Research conducted in 2002 in partial completion of a Bachelor of Science Degree in Geography from Royal Holloway, University of London, titled 'A Critical Examination of Subsistence Ethic and Economic Opportunity in the Bajo village of Sampela', by Mandy Wallace.

- Bajo School Discussion – 3 participants – all female

In addition to interviews and focus group discussions, observational work was conducted on varying roles that were listed by the participants. The activities that were observed include collecting water at the local well on Kaledupa, observing fishing activities including net, line, spear and octopus, household activities and the tying and harvesting of agar line. More specific roles including building a motorboat, crafting an oar, weaving mats, and the process involved in making the local 'Bajo bread' were also observed.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

The range of activities that women participate in are much greater than those of men and children. The reason behind this is that men class much of their day to day activities as being related to 'going to the sea' or 'fishing'. The majority of men and women both agree that women do the most work for the family and spend the most time on their activities. However, men justify this by claiming that although they do less work the activities that they do comprise of harder work that is intensified in a short period of time. As such, men require much rest and often take full days off from fishing to 'recover' especially if the sea conditions are not ideal for a fishing trip. The activities that children do are largely dependent on their age and their sex. Girls and boys are both expected to help out with household activities between the age's of 8 and 10 although 'errands' and general activities within small groups are common.

Female headed households (those who have been widowed, 'divorced' due to their partners remarrying or have partners abroad) comment that although they recognise that they have a greater responsibility in providing money and food to support the household, they do not perceive their activities as changing, they are just aware that they have to work harder and do more. Women in such circumstances do not feel any different from other people in the community regardless of their circumstances as they comment that the type of activities that they do and are expected to do are based on the widely held perception of what women are meant to do. In addition to this statement, women acknowledge that if their husband had been present it would make their roles easier to complete. Two respondents (from a sample size of 25) commented on how their roles were easier to complete now that their husbands were abroad as they actually had less work to do. They no longer had to worry about preparing their husbands food and fishing equipment and quite jovially viewed the temporary absence of their partner as respite.

The longitudinal research indicates that there has been a growth in economic activities over the past two years with more families partaking in small scale activities such as making and selling cake and also more structured a long term activities such as becoming middlemen and women or growing agar. This complements changes that are being detailed by both men and women. The longitudinal research also shows that for many families, changes that they would have liked to have made in their fishing method have not been achieved and instead changes are more preferable by moving to other economic activities. The range of fishing activities have also increased to include a greater number of specialised fishing methods such as octopus fishing. This trend is associated with a greater amount of middlemen and women and 'outside' fishing boat paying a good price for such species. Households are therefore capitalising on recent booms in the market.

The interviews with young adults provided a useful comparison between future roles they would like to do and future roles that their parents would like them to do. More stark, were activities that they would not like to do, which they related to bad habits or immoral activities such as gambling, drinking and smoking. Much of the data showed similarities between parental views and personal views and initial indicate a positive correlation with generational succession.

The responses' from the two neighbouring Bajo communities of LaHoa and Mantigola highlights that activities and roles of men, women and children do not differ markedly from those in Sampela. Fishing activity and additional economic activity differ slightly but this cannot be directly comparable due to the small sample size of interviews in each of the communities.

The elders that were interviewed described changes that had occurred before and after the Bajo settled. When asked to describe changes in the roles of men, women and children, they replied that the activities of women had changed little over time. Similarly they stated that men's roles had changed little although realised that fishing technique had progressed which constituted a change or progression.

One of the main changes that they noted was in relation to the roles of children. They remarked how in the past children had fewer roles to do and those that they did partake in such as gleaning was seen as a form of play with their friends in addition to completing an activity. The Elders viewed children as having more roles to do now as they had to go to school in addition to the greater amount of work that their parents required them to do. The activities that they do are based around selling cakes or candy and it has been suggested that this is a coping strategy employed by parents so that the children can 'earn' their own money for lipstick and other luxury items. The Elders commented that the age of children conducting roles had decreased and that now children were taking on roles at an earlier age; no explanation was provided for this occurrence.

The focus groups that were conducted increased the reliability of the interview data set and added new dimensions to the causative factors of change. They allowed a wider discussion of the themes and included people that had and had not been previously interviewed. They were a useful element of my data set.

The observational activities that took place backed up information that had been given in the interviews and allowed for an insight into the lives of others. It highlighted the social interactions that occur between and within households.