BEYOND THE DOMESTIC/PUBLIC DICHOTOMY: PROBLEMS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

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The Domestic/Public Dichotomy

Nearly twenty years ago, in a work that has become a landmark in women's studies by female anthropologists, Michelle Rosaldo proposed a dichotomy between a "domestic" orientation in women and a "public" orientation in men as a theoretical framework to analyze the universal position of women.

In the theoretical overview of the book *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974), Rosaldo accounted for the difference between the sexes in terms of this dichotomy by stating that there is a world-wide asymmetry of gender-identified activities: women's activities tended to be undervalued compared to those of their sexual counterpart and men were recognized as having culturally legitimated authority over women. By her definition, "domestic" meant "those minimal institutions and modes of activity that are organized immediately around one or more mothers and their children," and the "public" referred to "activities, institutions, and forms of association that link, rank, organize, or subsume particular mother-child groups" (Rosaldo 1974: 23). She hypothesized that women are primarily involved in "domestic" relations and activities, while men are free to form broader associations in the public domain. Women are bound to the "enduring, time-consuming and emotionally-compelling" commitment as exemplified in a mother's relation with her infant child, whereas men can keep their distance from the "messiness" of domestic life, and engage themselves in the hierarchical, political world. Based on her presumption that the "domestic" is subsumed under the "public" and hence the inhabitants of the "domestic" are subject to the authority of the inhabitants of the "public," Rosaldo concludes that the confinement of women to the domestic sphere and men's involvement in the public world accounted for the greater share of power and authority for men.

Questioning the Domestic/Public Dichotomy

This hypothesis of the dichotomous relationship between the sexes and the universal subordination of women has been challenged by a number of anthropologists who have gathered and analyzed field data from various parts of the world. In a recent review of criticisms against the theoretical dichotomy, Louise Lamphere, Rosaldo's coeditor for *Women, Culture, and Society,* candidly pointed out the difficulty that the dichotomy generally

encountered in the processes of empirical application, that the actual application was not possible in view of the diversity of women's activities in different cultures.

First of all, the domestic space and public space often overlapped, and gender-identified activities often intertwined. Drawing a clear line between the two spheres was not realistic. Rayna Reiter studied a small French village where she identified two categories of public space that were frequently occupied by women: the Church and three shops. In general, men and women did not mix in public space; women worked at home while men conducted their activities in the public space in the village. However, women relocated to public space—the Church, shops and the public square—vacated in the middle of the day by men who went to work in the fields. In spatial terms, both men and women occupied the same public space, albeit at different times. The extension of the women's sphere into public space was significant. (Reiter 1975: 257-8) In another study, Margaret Wolf (1972) reported that in a Taiwanese village there was more of a functional separation. Men and women were often located in the same physical space but had different activities and interests. Women developed their own strategies to cope with the patrilineal extended family and the male-dominated community. Their tactics often undermined male control of the household even the community. These two studies indicate that the dichotomy between "domestic" and "public" professed by Rosaldo is actually not that clear: spatial division is blurred with the extension of women into public space such as the Church and public square of Reiter's French village; and functional division within Taiwanese families prevents male authority in Wolf's study. Application of Rosaldo's hypothesis was proven impractical.

There are further examples indicating the difficulty, and perhaps the insignificance, in separating the two spheres. Cynthia Nelson (1974) emphasized the importance of women as structural links between social groups in Middle Eastern societies. Women, who are born in one patrilineal group and marry into another, often act as mediators and information-brokers. Women also form their own exclusive solidarity groups that exercise considerable social control. Women fill powerful ritual/supernatural roles as sorceresses, healers, and mediums. What is perceived as "domestic" often has public ramifications, and the influence of family and kin groups is always conspicuous behind the most "public" of situations. Eleanor Leacock observed that the "domestic" and "public" were fundamentally inseparable among the Iroquois with regard to women's control over the foods they produced. Women virtually had the power to veto declarations of war and to intervene to bring about peace by refusing the dispensation of the foods in their hands. They also guarded the "trival public treasure" kept in the long house. Thus, "household management" was itself the management of the "public economy." (Leacock 1978: 253) Finally, Niara Sudarkasa (1976) argues that in West African societies many of the political and economic activities anthropologists would consider as public are embedded in households. The public domain is not regarded as the "men's world." Instead, the public domain is organized in a way that both men and women have important roles to play. What actually exists is a separation between men's domain and women's domain, both of which provide personnel for domestic and public activities.

In addition to the difficulty and impracticality of differentiating the "domestic" and "public," Lamphere mentioned two other basic problems inherent in the concept. One is the circularity or tautology in the explanation of women's social position. Rosaldo conceived the dichotomy as a way to explain why women universally lack power and

authority. She asserted that the uniformity of women's powerlessness was based on the fact that all women were confined to the domestic sphere, a sphere in which, by her own definition, activities focus on mothering. In this hypothesis, a woman who bears and rears a child is relegated automatically to the domestic sphere, and as a result, the women is rendered powerless simply for being a woman. Therefore, her domestic/public dichotomy was not an explanation of women's powerlessness, but rather another manifestation of it. The other problem is that although the concepts were brought about in order to respond to the need for a universally applicable theoretical framework, they derived mainly from a particular cultural experience of the nations in narrow geographical areas during one historical period, namely, the Victorian heritage. Rayna Rapp summarizes the problem:

> We cannot write an accurate history of the West in relation to the Rest until we stop assuming that our experiences subsume everyone else's. Our public/private conflicts are not necessarily the same as those of other times and places . . . We must simultaneously understand the differences and the similarities, but not by reducing them to one simple pattern. (Rapp 1979: 511)

The anthropological studies of women initiated by a number of female researchers in the early 1970's has gone through a fundamental change in its approach over the past decade. It has shifted from the facile quest for a universal theory to a more diversified approach. Lamphere recognizes four new approaches: 1) examination of women's situation from a historical point of view, 2) treatment of women as active agents who have their own interests and strategies, 3) focus on gender relations, rather than only on women, and 4) analysis of women in terms of their social location, such as age, class, ethnicity, kinship and so on, rather than treating them all as part of the single universal category of "women." (Lamphere 1993: 72)

Nonetheless, Rosaldo's concept is not completely without value. After all, the domestic sphere of life, based on women's biological function to bear and nurse children, naturally involves women in any society and influences the ways women participate in public activities. What the field work of the 1970's and 80's revealed was the diversity in women's domestic lives, the important roles they play in the public world, and their strategies to develop and maintain their "power" and "authority." The inapplicability of the domestic/public dichotomy to many societies, mostly non-western, has led to the recognition of the divergence of women's lives in these societies and of what supposedly-universal concept was actually based on. As such, we can treat Rosaldo's concepts as a non-universal, particularistic theory that, in this case, explains the situation of women mainly of the urban middle class in industrialized western countries, typically England, France and the United States, from the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Further, the comparison of women's lives in other societies with the characteristics of this Victorian heritage will probably help in further clarifying differences, promoting reconsideration of other existing theories and concepts, and forming new theoretical frameworks that will replace the simple dichotomy.

What Dichotomy? Observations of Rural Malay Village

In the following, I will examine the assumptions and implications in the domestic/ public dichotomy that are said to be derived from the Victorian heritage in contrast to the situation of women in a rural Malay community in Southeast Asia where I conducted my field research.

At least four assumptions are detectable in Rosaldo's domestic/public dichotomy: 1) the two spheres, or domains, are spatially and functionally separable, 2) women are confined to the domestic sphere and have little to do with the public world, 3) women are segregated from each other by marriage, and 4) "power" and "authority" are acquired only through social positions and activities in the public world.

These assumptions are truly understandable as characteristics drawn from a life of a "housewife" of the urban middle class in an industrializing country. First, the "home" as the place for "domestic" activities is "organized around a mother and her children." The key functions related to economic production and distribution, education, religion and politics had long been removed from the home to the "public" world. Here, the spatial and functional separation of the two spheres of life is almost absolute. Second, married women have few opportunities to participate in matters that take place outside their homes. Even budgeting expenses for the family is usually out of the hands of the typical housewife in western industrializing countries. The "power" and "authority" are often concentrated in the husband who boasts an income from the outside public world and whose name— not coincidentally—represents the family. Third, the domestic group is typically a nuclear family, and social mobility in an industrial society often compels a married woman to live at a distance from her native family. This could prevent her from close contact on a regular basis with other women, such as her mother, sisters or long-term friends, on whom she could depend in times of need. Fourth, since the family is no longer a self-sustaining entity as it once was, and is completely integrated into the stratified society, it no longer has autonomous power; it must conform to, or at best cooperate with, the ideological and economic demands of the larger society. In such a hierarchical state, it seems natural to presume "power" and "authority" exist outside the "domestic" sphere. In short, a woman's life in this Victorian domestic sphere is characterized by "seclusion" and "powerlessness." (Hellerstein, Hume & Offen 1981)

In contrast, a rural Malay community in the northeast section of the Malay Peninsula presents a drastically different gender relationship. First, the domestic and public worlds are enmeshed inseparably. Unlike the distinct separation seen in Victorian society, most villagers conduct their daily activities in a "life zone," a zone that spreads concentrically outwards from one's household, to the neighborhood, the village, a few neighboring villages, and a local town where the weekly market opens. An individual house and the area surrounding it is more than a place for domestic activities; local political and religious gatherings take place at the home as well as wedding ceremonies and *kenduri*—communal meals celebrating special occasions.

Second, women are not at all confined to the "domestic" sphere. Childcare and housekeeping are primarily the women's responsibility, yet the majority of women follow

the Southeast Asian tradition—high commitment to economic production on a par with men. (Winzler 1982; Errington 1990) The individual, male or female, is typically involved in more than one kind of food- or income-generating activity, and is always willing to begin another activity, since no one in these rural areas is guaranteed a job or position that will bring a steady and satisfactory income for any length of time. Rice farming is mostly for household consumption; rubber trees and tobacco plants are grown as cash crops; landless (or land-short) villagers engage in farm labor. Men and women are equally involved in all these activities. There are some commercial activities conducted solely by one or the other gender. Private truck or taxi drivers, carpenters, masons, poultry and livestock brokers and construction workers in distant areas, such as Singapore, are men. On the other hand, women monopolize commercial trade; they include peddlers, village-shop owners and traders at local or distant markets.

Women's participation in political and religious activities is more extensive than their Victorian counterparts. All Malays are Muslims by definition and most of the villagers are devout practitioners of Islam in the Muslim-concentrated area of this multiethnic country. But while the teachings of Islam do not condone men and women to mingle freely in public, in Malay society, sexual separation is rigidly practiced only on formal occasions. The doctrine of sexual separation does not prevent women from participating in most public events. Public space is simply divided into two equal sections: men are received in one section and women in another. The rigidity of separation varies from being separated by mobile screens so that men and women can not even see each other, most typically at a mosque, to natural groupings by sex without any physical object dividing the two groups, such as at a political gathering in a private house. There are only a few occasions when women do not officially participate, including the Friday prayer service at a mosque and a wedding contract ceremony. But these are the exceptions to the rule. Indeed, sexual separation has little effect on women's participation in the public world.

Third, Malay village women take advantage of a closely-knit female network, something that a Victorian woman did not enjoy. As in most societies in Southeast Asia, the kinship system among the Malays is bilateral and the family fundamentally nuclear. (Goldschmidt & Kunkel 1971) These two institutions, complementary to one another, provide a foundation for life-time solidarity among kinswomen often strengthened by a custom in which women remain in the vicinity of her parents' home even after marriage, whereas men traditionally marry out to other areas. A female network in the neighborhood has many functions: a cooperative for farming, childcare, and preparation of communal feast for a large number of guests; a support group in time of crisis such as childbirth, sickness, temporary financial difficulties and a husband's secret remarriage to another woman; and an information network. Autonomous judgement based on widely-collected information through the network and collective support by the women enable them at times to exert considerable pressure on men. As a matter of fact, men in public positions are usually aware of the impact of women's solidarity and cautiously choose their behavior in order not to ruin their reputation among them.

Fourth is the question of the public world as an exclusive source of "power" and "authority." William Stephens suggested, in universal terms, that within the family there are patterns of hierarchy and dominance which are characteristic of the larger polity:

The kingdom emerges as a kind of pecking order social system in which similar deference behavior is repeated throughout many social relationships: wife to husband, child to father, child to father's brother, commoner to noble. Commoner women are at the bottom of this pecking order. They are ordinarily deferent to many persons, and deferred to by no one. (Stephens 1963: 338)

Such a description may apply to many states that have emerged in world history, yet it does not apply to the numerous pre-modern kingdoms in Southeast Asia. This section of the world presents a unique historical condition regarding the relationship between the domestic social order and higher political order of the kingdoms. These kingdoms were relatively small in size and their internal administrative development beyond the court and capital was weak. The ruling groups of these entities did not have the ability to strongly affect the domestic organization of the village-dwelling population. Charles Madge, after studying the emergence of Southeast Asian kingdoms in comparison with the dynasties in neighboring civilizations, comes up with the following conclusion:

Such petty kingdoms with only small peasant concentrations of a few villages to support them cannot exert much influence on the scattered outlying population. Even when a substantial kingdom was built up, as in Thailand, population density remained low by comparison with that of Mauryan India, Han China or Japan at the time of the Taika Reform. Southeast Asia thus lacked what India, China, and Japan had in common . . . long established high rural population density and authoritarian patrilineal norms emanating from elite groups and diffusing to the population as a whole. (Madge 1974: 164)

In India, China and Japan rural communities, where family and kinship were the major social institutions, were integrated by force into a stratified larger polity which had a strong central government and effective local administrative organizations. Through the processes of integration, the communities were reorganized according to political ideologies, cultural values and religious doctrines brought in by the ruling outsiders and supported by conformists from within. This marked the beginning of a "domestic" sphere completely subsumed into and controlled by the external "public" world. But if Madge's observations are valid, then Southeast Asian rural societies are exceptions to the pattern proposed by Stephens, for the "scattered outlying population" made up of domestic entities is not subsumed under the public realm of the kingdom. Consequently, the hierarchical relationship between the "domestic" and "public," as defined by Rosaldo, are not applicable to these societies including Malay rural communities. Their "public" world was generally underdeveloped and could not control independently and effectively "domestic" institutions. Conversely, the "domestic" sphere may have affected or limited the formation and maintenance of the "public" world.

In other words, when the "public" world exists by itself as an overwhelmingly powerful and influential force over the "domestic" sphere, one is led to believe, as Rosaldo was, that all the "power" and "authority" come from there. Yet, a close study of a society in which "public" institutions exert limited force, and the "domestic" sphere remains relatively unaffected by the external "authority," will shed light on the existence of "power" and "authority" of a different sort, such as those generated within "domestic" institutions.

Further, the question of the source of power inevitably presents us with another problem: the uniformly assumed nature of "power." Shelly Errington points out:

> [W]e tend to assume that "power" and "status" are cross-culturally recognizable. We in Euro-America tend to identify power with economic control and coercive force: any status or prestige not linked to it we tend to conceptualize as empty prestige, mere symbolism. We also tend to identify "power" with activity, forcefulness, getting things done, instrumentality, and effectiveness brought about through calculation of means to achieve goals. The prevalent view in many parts of island Southest Asia, however, is that to exert force, to make explicit commands, or to engage in direct activity—in other words, to exert "power" in a Western sense—reveals a lack of spiritual power and effective potency, and consequently diminishes prestige. (Errington 1990: 5)

Here, Errington suggests two different interpretations of exerting force: one is recognized as power in the western tradition, and the other as a lack of same in Southeast Asia. The former is presented as an activity- or goal-oriented, instrumental and direct "power" that is often associated with economic control and coercive force. The latter can be seen, in contrast, as a spiritual "power" that has little in common with the former. Tentatively, I will view the former as "secular power" and the latter "spiritual power." Errington presents these two contrasting powers parallel with cultural differences in two regions (i.e., western societies and Southeast Asia). However, Errington continues to write in her theoretical and regional overview of a collection of case studies on gender and power in Southeast Asia, from which the above quote is taken, what seems to be the identification of the existence of two types of power in one region. She states that in Southeast Asia women are usually the ones who deal with money and control family finances and often become traders. Also, women are conceived as "more calculating, instrumental, and direct than men." As a result,

> . . . [women's] very control of practical matters and money, their economic "power" may be the opposite of the kind of "power" or spiritual potency that brings the greatest prestige, [and] it may assure them of lower than higher prestige. (Errington 1990: 6–7)

Thus, Errington indicates the allocation of two types of power by sexes: women tend to maintain "secular power," while men are entitled to more prestigious "spiritual power." "Spiritual power," or more precisely "spiritual potency," is something that is considered to be innate in men, that provides men with greater prestige, and that is often used to justify male leadership in religion and politics. Southeast Asia is a region in which female power based in the domestic sphere has been preserved against male prestige, partly because of the historical condition that rural societies were not effectively absorbed into a larger state society.

Summary

The concept of domestic/public dichotomy suggested by Michelle Rosaldo twenty years ago has been criticized by many anthropologists and proven to be ineffective as a "universal theory to explain women's worldwide lesser positions. Basically, two kinds of

problems against the conceptual framework have been presented. In summary, they are: 1) the anthropological research data from various parts of the world indicate that women's experience is so diverse that they can not be reduced to the one simple pattern suggested by this dichotomy; and 2) since the concept itself is rooted in a particular cultural/historical experience, it has its own limitations and is unsuitable to serve as a universally applicable theoretical framework. Nonetheless, the assumption and implications contained in the dichotomy are worth examining in order to further clarify cultural/regional diversities, and to reveal the theoretical areas which need more attention or reexamination. Previous studies such as those by Reiter and Wolf clearly show the difficulty of drawing a definitive line between the "public" and "domestic" domains and the physical seclusion of women from "public" space. By presenting details of Southeast Asia in general, and Malaysian rural communities in particular, I have suggested two other areas that require further examination: the significance of women's informal networks based on kinship in creating and maintaining female "power," and the problems of identifying and defining what exactly "power" is.

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