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An Observation on Female Cooperation Among the Zapotecs, an Indigenous People of Southern Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural study has suggested that the presence of an extradomestic market for women's produce is one precondition for the development of female solidarity groups, and that such groups seem to be antecedent to female public power and/or authority. If status is defined in these terms, then the Zapotec women of Asunción, a village of the inland Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico, have not attained the preconditions of public power and/or authority. The complementary nature of husband and wife in the economic sphere assures women of some domestic power, however, and women do not seem to perceive their status as low. Descriptive studies of female cooperation have relevance to the broader issue in anthropology of how best to account for the development of intrasex solidarity, male or female.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-culturally and throughout history women generally have participated less than men in the organization of public (extradomestic) enterprise, and have exercised a correspondingly lesser share of public power. This "sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life" (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974, p. 3). To the extent, however, that women have organized themselves in extradomestic groups, as in West African market-women's associations and secret societies, they often have been accorded more public power, both economic and political, than elsewhere (Leis, 1974, p. 223).

That women do not more often organize themselves into public groups can be attributed to the priority of feminine domestic roles. Also, it has been suggested that women are innately less predisposed to form organized groups than are men (Tiger, 1969). If the degree to which women exercise public power is related to their ability to cooperate extradomestically with other women, then it is important to try to understand the conditions under which women do so cooperate and also the conditions that discourage them from cooperation.

According to the cross-cultural study by Sanday (1974), the presence of a market for women's produce is a significant antecedent variable in the formation of female solidarity groups, and these groups, in turn, tend cross-culturally to be antecedent to the development of female extradomestic political power and/or authority. In the large Zapotec towns on the Pacific coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico, the public marketplace is a characteristic feature, and is populated almost entirely by women, both as buyers and as sellers. Chiflas, who has described one such coastal town (1973), reports that women are not organized formally into public groups, but that they do cooperate informally in many ways.

Field research was undertaken among the Zapotecs of the hilly country of the interior of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, partly in order to provide a descriptive basis for comparison with the coastal Zapotecs (see Fig. 1). A small rural village (referred to here by the fictitious name of "Asunción") was chosen which has neither a marketplace nor ready access to one. Fieldwork was carried out during three trips to the isthmus between 1970 and 1973, totalling about 15 months, three of which were spent in intensive investigation in Asunción.

Though the sexual division of labor among the inland Zapotec is more complementary than that on the coast, the economic preconditions for the formation of extradomestic female organizations, as specified by Sanday (1974), seem to be lacking. In the material that follows, all references to San Juan, the fictitiously named coastal town studied by Chiflas, derive from a single source (Chiflas, 1973).

WOMEN OF ASUNCION

In both Asunción and San Juan, inheritance of land is bilateral and gives women some measure of economic control. In neither community do women work in the fields or carry nursing infants with them when they have business outside the home. In San Juan, women leave the home to attend to marketing; in Asunción, women often leave the home for purposes of gathering, fishing and cleaning. In both cases such activities may involve considerable travel and absence during a major part of the day.

An important difference is the cash income to each household in the two communities. In San Juan, men raise most crops for cash sale, and many men are, in addition,
employed for cash wages. In Asunción, by contrast, money is scarce during most of the year except immediately after the coffee harvest; most men grow corn for subsistence, and the women process it. The mutual dependence of husband and wife in Asunción is striking, and although separation and remarriage are not rare, in no case did an unmarried woman attempt to head her own household. In contrast, on the coast female-headed households constitute about 20% of all households (Litzler, 1970, p. 73).

Although some Asuncion women engage in minor house-to-house marketing of food items, in every case the woman, when interviewed, stated that the cash proceeds went to the household as a unit, and were not kept separate for the woman's use or for reinvestment in market goods (although some reinvestment surely occurred). Large cash transactions, such as the buying and selling of land, loans, and the selling of coffee, normally are handled by the husband. It is also the husband who represents the family by handling over his share of the annual fiesta funds.

In these representations of the household to the community, it is clearly the husband who has the authority to act for the family. However, the extent to which masculine authority confers on a man real power to control members of his own domestic group, including his wife, is qualified. A husband cannot with impunity mistreat his wife or restrict her movements too severely, because she may leave him, and because she requires a certain amount of autonomy if she is to carry out some of her essential economic activities outside the household, such as gathering and fishing trips in the company of other women. Female autonomy is more important to the less affluent women who need to supplement the household food supply by such activities. Although women enjoy these extrahousehold experiences, it is likely that some (though not all) would give up them if they could, to avoid the considerable expenditure of energy that they entail. Others, who do not obviously need either to gather and fish or to engage in house-to-house marketing, do so because they are upwardly mobile.

When women do travel outside the home, be it to the spring to bathe, wash clothes and fetch water or to the next village to sell bread, fruit and vegetables, they always go in company with other women. In this they share the nearly universal Mexican view that for a woman to be alone is not respectable and invites improper masculine attention. Women need other women, therefore, but for companionship and for protection of their respectability, and not for purposes of economic cooperation.

Each woman's part in gathering, glean from harvested fields and fishing is individual, and what each produces is her own. About the only organization required is to agree where to meet and when to leave together for the day's expedition.

Local marketing activities are also individualistic. The product most commonly marketed is homemade bread, which is made by the women and generally taken around from house to house in the early morning by a daughter. Not all women have ovens, but a neighbor's oven may be borrowed or rented. The owner of the oven does not otherwise share in the enterprise.

Nor is there any agreement among bread-makers to coordinate their sales. Thus, on some mornings, four or five bread-sellers may make the rounds, whereas on other mornings there is no bread to be had in the entire village. There is little attempt, in short, to control the market cooperatively.

Two women in Asunción made special sweet breads to sell in a neighboring village, because its ingredients were such that the price of the finished product was beyond the buying capacities of the immediate villagers.

In general, local marketing is limited in two ways: (1) by lack of cash for purchasing goods for sale, and (2) by disinterest on the part of women to engage in the traveling necessary to market their goods, and also by the husbands' occasional discouragement of their wives' traveling outside the village for fear of improper advances by men of other communities.

Only one woman had attempted to initiate, on her own, marketing in the more distant coastal towns, and did so only when she was desperate for funds to feed her seven children while her husband was disabled. Significantly, this woman had been born outside the isthmus, and thus had more travel experience than is usual for inland isthmus inhabitants. Her experiment was a failure, not only because of the high costs of labor and transportation relative to profits, but primarily because her residential isolation from the marketplaces of the coastal towns did not permit her to know in advance what the market conditions would be. On the day she arrived on the coast with oranges, for example, the market was flooded with oranges, and she earned barely enough to make her way home again.

**DISCUSSION**

According to Sanday (1974), the presence of an extraregional outlet for women's produce is an antecedent condition for the development of female solidarity groups. In Asunción women's work often obliges them to engage one another's company, but rarely involves cooperation. There is a local market for what women produce, but it is severely limited, and is dispersed in separate households rather than centered in a marketplace.

Although bilateral inheritance and a large degree of autonomy might permit women to increase their economic control beyond that which they now exercise, the complementary nature of male and female work in Asunción is such as to encourage household solidarity between husband and wife, and to discourage it among women. Women have, in addition to some autonomy and economic control, informal power that prevents men from heavy-handedly wielding their authority over them. Women in fact usually express themselves satisfied with their status relative to men.

Compared with the women in San Juan, as described by Chilias (1973), women of Asunción have slightly less opportunity for intrasex interaction away from home, especially cooperative interaction. The relatively lesser mutual economic dependence of husbands and wives (though not necessarily of men and women) in San Juan is reflected in the substantially larger proportion of adult women who do not reside with husbands, but head their own households.

If Sanday (1974) is correct in identifying female economic independence from men through marketing, and female solidarity groups, as two conditions that precede the development of high female status relative to male status, then it seems that the women of San Juan are somewhat further along the course of that development than are the women of Asunción. Although Sanday's study was based on a carefully selected but small sample, and though the comparative analysis between Asunción and San Juan is somewhat tentative, it is hoped that the present report helps to clarify some of the conditions under which extraregional female cooperative organization may develop.

The work of Tiger (1969) recently has focused attention on solidarity and cooperation among males. Though few female anthropologists would readily accept his implication that males
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are innately more inclined to form solidarity groups than are females, his views have helped to stimulate greater attention to the conditions under which females interact cooperatively (e.g., Leis, 1974). Perhaps, as a result of further descriptive studies, male and female forms of solidarity can be compared more directly.

LITERATURE CITED


