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The Roles of Women, Children and Men in Household Food Planning, Purchasing, Preparation and Consumption in Santiago, Cuba

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Thinking Gender 2009 Paper—Hanna Garth: "The Roles of Women, Children and Men in Household Food Planning, Purchasing, Preparation and Consumption in Santiago, Cuba"

Introduction: This work explores the roles of Women, Children and Men in Household food planning, purchasing, preparation and consumption in Santiago de Cuba. The data for this investigation were collected over a 10-week period during the Summer of 2008. This work focuses on Cuba's second largest city, Santiago, located in the southeastern part of the island, Santiago provides an urban setting through which to view urban food cultivation and food symbolism in Cuba. Little scholarly work has been published on food issues in Santiago. Santiago is generally perceived of as being more "rural" than Havana; Santiagueros often self-identify as *guajeros* or peasants, though the population is about 500,000 people and the average population density is about 500 people per square kilometer. Santiago's tropical climate provides ideal growing conditions for many crops, including sugar, tobacco, coffee and fruit.

For Santiagueros, the making of a meal is deeply tied with remembered histories of consumption patterns associated with their Spanish, African, Indian and Haitian ancestors (Sahlins 1990:95). As Ted Bestor has argued, "the time and space of present-day activity as well as the sense of place-and identity are constructed out of accounts of the past (Bestor 2004)." The consumption of food is conditioned by various forms of meaning from class distinction to religious practice to cultural preferences and nationalism (Allen 2001; Askegaard, 2008; (Barthes 1997; Gofton 1986; Sahlins 1990), and these meanings are also symbolic and have histories (Appadurai 1988a; Mintz 1996; Premat 1998). Through the study of food one can examine social conditions, taboos and boundaries, and implicate the symbolic and material conditions of society (Khare 1992) as indexical of the social hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, symbolic boundaries, and social relations in a particular community (Douglas 1972). These social

relations in turn imply complex power dynamics and individual positions within the social and cultural hierarchy, not only of food but also in society in general.

This paper explores the observed practices of urban meal planning, food acquisition, and meal preparation. The techniques employed to find, process, prepare, serve and consume the foods are all culturally variable with histories and meanings of their own.

Women's rights in Cuba

From the beginning of the 20th century Cuban women have worked outside the home, attended school, had the right to vote and have been practicing birth control. Article 44 of the Cuban constitution states that "men and women have equal rights in economic, political, cultural and social endeavors as well as within the family. The Cuban state guarantees women the same opportunities and possibilities as men, so that women can achieve full participation in the development of the country (Gaceta Oficial)." Additionally, the Family Code of 1975 was another official position toward equality and mutual respect between the sexes. In 1992 an official program was implemented to cover salary during 3 months prior to and 3 months after the birth of a child. An additional unpaid 6 months of leave may be taken and mothers are guaranteed the right to return to their jobs. Both of these benefits are seen as part of state efforts to "create conditions that accomplish equality (Gaceta Oficial; Miller, 2002)."

The Cuban government childcare system is another way that the state attempts to create conditions that accomplish equality. Currently there are approximately 1,000 state subsidized, full-day childcare programs in Cuba, providing care for 184,000 children. Childcare teachers and primary school teachers all receive the same level of education at the pedagogical university and equal pay, approximately \$18 per month, for their teaching.

Cuba's extensive childcare and early childhood education system has been paramount in Cuban women's ability to work outside the home. Still there remains the notion of the traditional *calle/casa* divide-- women belong in the home and men in the streets. The *calle/casa* division of gendered spaces has persisted since Cuba's independence from Spain (Pertierra 2008; Smith et al 1996; Stoner 1991). This approach to women's place in the world is often linked to white bourgeois Spanish thinking, however it can be seen across racial lines throughout various economic classes in Cuban society.

Despite legislative efforts toward the equality of women in Cuba, many women remain marginal, particularly Afro-Cuban women. Afro-Cubans constitute about 35% of the Cuban population and closer to 60% of the population in Santiago de Cuba. Afro-Cuban women are the lowest wage earners with the least amount of political representation. They have the highest rates of unemployment, the lowest education levels of any demographic in Cuba.

While it is true that the role of men in household work is widely varied along social and class lines, it is true that men are generally conceived of as breadwinners whose primary work is outside the home. As Pertierra notes, typically the male contribution to the household will consist of: "generating income to cover domestic expenses, organizing house and furniture repairs, and running errands requiring lifting (Pertierra 2008: 746)."

Results

I quickly found that in most households of the domestic work is carried out by women, this includes not only the planning, preparation and serving of meals, but also cleaning, ensuring that bills are paid and that the house runs smoothly. However, I did observe a few examples in which these tasks appeared to be divided almost equally between the female and the male heads of household. These more egalitarian homes tended to be situations where both adults were

working outside the home and they tended to be higher socio-economic status households. I will present two ethnographic examples here, one of which illustrates the sentiment that domestic work is and/or should be carried out by women, the other example illustrates a more egalitarian division of labor in the household where the woman of the house is still “in charge” but daily tasks are more evenly divided.

After a day of tagging along with Mickey, a 40-year-old man from Santiago, on his daily excursion to buy food for his family at the local peso market, we stopped to rest in the shade in the middle of our uphill walk home. Setting down the heavy bags filled with mangos, melons, yucca, potatoes and other vegetables, Mickey breathed a sigh of relief. I took the opportunity to ask him about what he saw as typical gender roles in a Cuban household. He knew that the focus of my research centered on food and he explained "things have really changed" from his parents' generation to his generation. He noted that women are usually in charge of "running the household" and women usually plan meals and ensure that there is enough food for everyone. One of the major changes during his generation is that more and more women are working outside of the home. Due to the fact that fewer women stay at home, the daily preparation of meals has shifted from being the sole job of mothers to a task that is shared by many members of the household. Mickey elaborated:

"Sometimes it is the grandmothers that do all of the cooking in the house--this is not new, but other times children--both boys and girls will make things and men as well. For example, sometimes I make the breakfast at home--it is something easy that I can do. Or my son will help prepare fruit or the salad for meals. Things didn't used to be this way."

With respect to the acquisition of food and other goods for the home, Mickey explained that:

"It is really about muscles. I go to the market when we need a lot because I have more muscle to carry it up the hill. [My wife] goes when it is just a few things because she can carry it. She does most of the shopping for little things I do the big trips. This is changing how for some women who have those bags with wheels on them--they don't need muscle."

Mickey's involvement in the household varies greatly with the experience of Berto. Berto is in his mid-30s and has lived in Santiago all of his life. He lives outside of the city center in a home with his mother, father, 2 sisters, his son and his wife. When I broached the topic of food with him, Berto's immediate response was: "I don't know anything about that. I am a man; that is women's work." I asked him if he ever cooked or went to the market or help out in anyway with the family's meals and he responded that he did not help out at all now nor had he ever. He quickly segued into the topic of childcare in Cuba, implying that because women were able to send children to daycare cheaply, they were able to both work and take care of the household with greater ease.

"The childcare center is very cheap for us, because it is based on my wife's pay. She gets paid less. She takes our son at 7am and she goes to work. On her way home she stops to buy food for dinner. Usually either she cooks or my mother will cook something. My wife takes care of all of those kinds of things."

Discussion :Berto presents a view of the role of men and women in the household that aligns well with the traditional *calle/casa* divide. In his statement, "I am a man; that is women's work," he explicitly states his view that certain categories of work should pertain exclusively to particular gender categories. He insinuates that because he is a man he should not and does not participate in women's work.

Berto's maintenance of the ideology of *calle/casa* divide purports similar ideas about the capabilities of women and the need to protect women as Mickey's assertion that "its about muscles." Mickey asserts that as a man he must do the heavy lifting because he is more physically capable of doing the work of carrying food. It is of course true that men and women have different body types; according to biological anthropologists sexual dimorphism is in part due to hormonal factors and traits necessary for female reproduction. Unlike in the *calle/casa* divide where much of the motivation for the ideology of women's placement in the home is to

“protect” women, Mickey asserts that this work should be done by men not as a protection to women but simply because men are more biologically equipped.

Mickey also notes that technology can and does play a key role in shifting the gendered division of labor in food procurement and possibly beyond. He notes that the “bags with wheels on them” allow some women to overcome the muscle hurdle by pulling their food home from the market on wheels—“they don’t need muscle.” Mickey insinuates that these bags with wheels are a new phenomenon in Santiago, that previous generations did not have such technologies. Additionally, such technologies would allow for elderly Santiagueros to remain independent for a longer period of time. Also, implicit in his narrative, I should note that the ability to have access to such technologies requires access to capital. Many lower-income households in Santiago could not afford such purchases.

Mickey points to a shift in gender roles in Santiago from generation to generation, this shift coming along with significant political and economic shifts in Cuba. The increasing support for women who work outside the home may have shifted the balance of food preparation in the home. Mickey notes that, in addition to men, children may play a more integral role in helping with household activities, making food preparation an activity for the whole family rather than just the female head of household.

Conclusion

Though these conclusions are preliminary and further research needs to be done, this work locates a shift in local views on gender roles in food procurement and preparation in Santiago do Cuba. This may show, similar to Michelle Rosaldo’s work, a potential space for the improvement of the status of women in Cuba through increasing independence of women and the increasing role of Cuban men in household work.

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