

Traditional Sex Roles

Obviously, this way of thinking affects the way the sexes are conceptualized and how they are expected to behave toward each other. The household, as a functioning production unit, is built around the married couple, called warmighari, literally



"woman-man", the fusion of two different but interdependent kinds of human being, with separate but complementary knowledge, interest and abilities. This relationship is summed up in various ways:

"Women know how to work with their hands; men know how to work with their feet." So women spin, weave and cook in or near their homes, while men plough the earth and travel.

"Women are horizontal, their place is the pampa, the flat ground; men are vertical, they perform their activities standing or sitting on seats." So the vertical upright loom with foot pedals is suitable for males, while the horizontal loom is suitable for females. The great extensive earth is female, Pachamama or Mother Earth, while the high snow-capped mountains are male, called Apus (Lords) or Taytakuna (Fathers).

"Men don't know how to take care of animals; women know how to take care of growing things." On the other hand, "Men know how to talk in the Assembly; women don't know how." So women bear and tend children and look after the animals. Men pass through a hierarchy of community offices. At public functions men sit on seats in a line, roughly in order of seniority, while women sit in a crowd on the ground.

The image of Woman evoked by these dichotomies is characterized by immobility. While the men are coming and going, building and talking, and passing vertically through a civil-religious hierarchy of offices, the women are sitting on the ground covered by layers of heavy skirts, their hands busily reaching in all directions. How beautifully this idea is expressed in dancing, as the women bend over their full skirts and twirl around in place, while the men go stamping and leaping around them! It is also well expressed in the different expressions of respect suitable for men and women: a prosperous influential man is called ghapac, which can be translated as "noble" or "mighty." The comparable term for woman is wira, which means "fat" or "substantial."

While a woman may not have a man's mobility she is neither inactive nor passive. On the contrary, she has a female way of asserting herself. Women support and anchor the life of the community and household, and it is in this that their power resides.

The All-Male Assembly

Turning to the realm of community politics, this sexual ideology would seem to (and in certain respects does) put women at a distinct disadvantage to men. The central governing body of Sonqo is the Assembly, considered the voice of the Ayllu Runa, the people of the community. The constitutive units of the assembly are households, not individuals. Each of Sonqo's 84 households is represented by its senior male member. The women in attendance seldom number more than four or five, consisting of widows and women whose husbands are ill or absent. These women sit in a group separately from the men, sometimes at such a distance that it is difficult to hear the proceedings, much less take part in them.

The President of Administration presides over the Assembly, accompanied by a Vice President and Secretary, and often by the Alcalde (mayor) with his staff of office. Often they are "assisted" by a schoolteacher or government agent. The presiding officers are elected by the Assembly and serve for a term of two years. As the President represents the community to the national government and its agents, his position provides opportunities for self-aggrandizement and exercise of personal power. Sonquenos are keenly aware of this danger and repeatedly emphasized to me that it is the Assembly and not the President or other officers that makes decisions. On one occasion the President was nearly impeached for having accepted a government loan of eucalyptus trees without consulting the Assembly.

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So the individuals who hold political office are not supposed to wield political power; they simply proclaim and carry out the collective will. The Alcalde (mayor), in particular, with his staff of office, is validator and by his presence makes the Ayllu's decisions official.

But what is the Ayllu? Is it the group of men and few silent women who meet at intervals to argue and vote? Initially this seems to be the case, for watching the Assembly gives the impression that decision-making is vested in a group of young and middle-aged males, with females and old men excluded from the political process. But this is a mistaken impression, similar to that created by a play, which fixes our attention on the actors on the stage and makes us forget that the observable action is produced and directed from behind the scenes. In Sonqo, while vigorous men play out the public drama of political life, the women and old men are the invisible production crew. While we focus our attention on the public stage we miss half the action, and inevitably must fail to understand how community politics function.

Although during my fieldwork I lived in the President's house and attended the Assemblies, I usually had the feeling that the way things were "really" getting done was eluding me. I wondered whether there was a "council of elders", but eventually I realized that no such council exists. Decision-making goes on through seemingly casual visiting, as influential men and women (the qhapag and the wira) call on each other in the evening or before breakfast, to chat and chew coca, or as they talk soberly during communal work parties while younger men work noisily at the heavy tasks.

In this elusive process of sub rosa decision-making, the opinions of the substantial women (wira warmi) carry

a great deal of weight. In Assemblies, the Mamakuna (mothers, mature women) and Kuraq Taytakuna (Elder Fathers) are a significant, albeit invisible, presence. The men in the Assembly do not represent themselves as individuals, but represent their households, including their wives and aged parents, and are accountable to them. This makes the decision-making process difficult to understand for the government agent, school teacher or anthropologist who watches only the public drama.

The Power of Women

But what about situations in which women have to enter the public arena to achieve a goal that cannot be achieved otherwise? Clearly a woman without a husband for a mouthpiece, or who is seriously at odds with her husband, is at a great disadvantage. The most unpleasant incidents I witnessed in Sonqo were those in which women tried to address the Assembly as individuals, inevitably without success. In one case, a woman who had married into Sonqo but returned to her natal community after her husband's death, showed up in the Assembly to demand her widow's rights of seed potatoes and labor. She was rejected without hesitation, and her gift of trago (cane alcohol) was returned unopened by the President.

Having failed to press her case as a single woman in a male forum, the Widow changed her tactics. She did have a certain amount of sympathy from other women who had married into Sonqo. At the next communal work party these women appeared among the kinswomen of the hosting officials, bringing food and chicha (corn beer) for the laboring menfolk. After the work was finished, the gathering divided into the usual male and female groupings, who sat around chatting and chewing coca.

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At this point the Widow appeared again, and was loudly welcomed by the women who sympathized with her. Sonquénos consider it impossibly rude to turn away a guest who has been invited by even one member of a party, so -- while most of the men and many of the women were quietly displeased -- the Widow settled down and was offered coca and chicha. After a few minutes she presented the President with two bottles of trago. To my surprise he accepted them, and had them served to the gathering. The husband of another woman, who had also married-in, rose to argue the Widow's case. Even before he began it was clear that she had already won, and the ensuing debate centered not on whether she would be helped, but on how much she would be helped.

Later I asked the President why he accepted the trago, when it committed the Ayllu to an unwelcome contract it had previously refused.

"The Mamakuna (mothers, mature women) accepted her," he answered, "so we had to accept her too."

The Widow achieved her goal by confronting the men -- not on their own terms -- but on a woman's terms. She recruited a collective base of female support at a gathering properly attended by both sexes. This group of women cleverly maneuvered the men into risking a serious breach of etiquette. Finally, they exploited a male representative. This collective female support with a male mouthpiece won the day before a word was spoken.

In another incident a woman proved able to enforce the Ayllu's will when the men were unsuccessful. In 1975 the Alcalde-elect announced that he would not accept his office. In spite of his public election and unremitting pressure from his elders and peers, he stubbornly held out into December, only a few weeks before his inauguration. Backed by a group of women, his mother coerced him into serving, exploiting a religious feast day, another occasion on which both men and women

gather to eat and drink together. Seated next to a big jar of chicha, surrounded by a crowd of women, she began to scream at her son, "What are you? Are you a Quechua person?", continuing with a long stream of condemnation. Although most of the men agreed with her, they begged her to be quiet in a subdued chorus. Eventually she subsided, and the feast continued. The next day the word was out that the Alcalde-elect had agreed to accept his office.

To summarize, female power is exerted collectively, and consists essentially in the power of veto and commentary. Those who have spent time in Quechua households will find this familiar -- recalling how as a man of the house prepares his family's offering to Pachamama and Apus, his wife sits at his side selecting the ingredients and correcting his invocations; how as a man tells traditional stories, his wife coaches him and he accepts her corrections. The political sphere is not essentially different, except that in the Assemblies the Mamakuna are not physically at their husbands' side -- but their invisible presence weighs heavily nonetheless. When, in extreme cases, women as a group decide to "go public," they cause a kind of social earthquake -- an upheaval of the private substream of public life.

This way of operating does not sit well with a modern professional woman, eager to meet men on her own terms in a public forum. But there is much to be learned from it; that this is not a simple matter of female subordination but something much more subtle and complex; and that the powers as well as the limitations of Sonqo women are inherent in the total socio-cultural system -- a system whose resilience and strength resides to a great extent in the invisible, elusive -- and potentially violent -- character of female power.

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