

# The Fiction of Women's Power. Discourses on Family and the Role of Women in Fishing Communities of the Ciénaga Grande<sup>1</sup>

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If you listen to the conversations of the fishermen in the villages along the Atlantic coast of Colombia, especially in the region of the Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta, women's research should be a very satisfying task: There you will find the matriarchy.

Men energetically emphasize the power of women and their position of power within the family, and they stress their influence in the community. The assertion, "We live in a matriarchy" is widespread.

Women, however, characterize their position as less powerful.

When they speak about their life, their responsibility for the household and children's education, their talent for organization, and their eloquence as well as their perseverance play a predominant role. They also admit to economic dependence, however, and complain about sexual infidelity and unstable partner relationships which go along with the irresponsibility of the partner towards his wife and children. Yet the women see themselves as the "stronger ones" ("somos las más fuertes"). They say that masculine power lies in their physical strength, while women dispose of more intelligence.

Even though these women live under different conditions, they do not see themselves as victims. Rather, they always stress their power.

Indeed, the women are self-confident. Elderly women enjoy respect, and in certain areas of public life, the presence of women is evident. Actual everyday life, however, does not give the impression that the leadership in the community lies in the hands of women. This extreme gap between everyday life and widely accepted ideology makes it necessary to seek the causes, the significance and the functions of such discourse so obviously divergent from reality.

Some brief descriptions of the structure of the economy and the family, and their presuppositions in the specific environment should help one to understand the concept and the importance of the family from the perspective of both men and women.

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<sup>1</sup>This article is based on the study conducted in the communities of the Ciénaga Grande from October to November 1992 within the German-Columbian ecological project PRO-CIENAGA (Freiberg-Strauß 1989; Ströbele-Gregor 1993).

In the following section we shall deal with the gender-specific role assigned to women in fishing communities in order to analyze the function of masculine discourse about “matriarchal conditions”.

The fishing communities in the Ciénaga Grande are located along inland waters in a delta landscape with a big silty lagoon separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a dike that was built in the sixties.

In former times, the inland waters were full of fish, but since human intervention has repeatedly interfered with the complex ecological system, the waters are no longer in balance, and the system has started degenerating.

Thus, the economic situation of the fisher families living in three lake dwellers’ villages and four villages located along the overland road at the dike, is rapidly worsening.<sup>2</sup> The situation varies from village to village, however. The fishers engage in small-scale fishing in the inland waters for their own consumption as well as for commercial purposes. The infrastructural advantage of the villages along the road comes to bear in commercial pursuits.

Fishing takes place as an economic activity at the family level, yet the income is so low that not every fisher owns a boat. The narrow wooden canoes can accommodate only two persons, and only a few have outboard motors. It is common practice – even within the family (e.g. between son and father) – to rent a boat in exchange for a share of the catch or of the sales.

This dependence of sons on the father represents the father’s social security, especially when the father is elderly.

The importance of the type of family economy in which operational and household spheres are interrelated cannot be overestimated (Freiberg-Strauß 1989:59). This is because a different type of dependence and reliance exists between family members of an extended three-generation family and between relatives than between individual fishers and those who rent boats, or dealers. The families in the road villages can diversify their source of income to a certain extent because of their location.

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<sup>2</sup>According to the census of 1985, 16,500 persons lived within the seven fishing communities; 4,200 persons were working as fishers. About 67% of the fisher families lived in the four villages located along the coastal road between Santa Marta and Barranquilla: Pueblo Viejo, Tasajeras, Isla del Rosrio and Palmira and 33% live in the three Palafitte villages of Boca de Cataca, Buenavista and Nueva Venezia (El Morro). The birth-rate is about 3.5% and is above the national average. On the average, 500 persons leave the villages every year, especially the Palafitte villages. This is due to the limited economic options within the villages. The average size of the nuclear family is relatively large. Women have 4.7 children on the average, which means that a large number of women give birth to between 8 and 12 children.

Fishing for the local market (crab catch, oysters) provides one additional income source; commerce and narcotics traffic (very common at the coast) provides another. These socio-economic structures were not without consequences for the social structure, ways of life, and the living conditions of families, and women in particular.

In these villages, the degree of violence within and beyond the family is much greater than in the lake-dwellers' villages. The break-up of families and the existence of a female head of household are also more prevalent. The existence of local markets and the road offers women the possibility of having their own income, thus enabling survival, even if at a poverty level, if their partner leaves them.

The residents of the lake-dwellers' villages have always maintained relations with the coastal villages, since some of them came from there.

Recent migration triggered by the catastrophic environmental conditions in the delta has led to an extension of the network of relationships, even as far as the city of Barranquilla.

As far as economic strategies are concerned, this extended network plays an essential role in both types of villages, since commerce and exchange, and cooperation in all kinds of enterprises occur predominantly within the framework of the family and the networks of *compadrazgo*. This is the case since these are the only relations considered reliable. Mutual help and support is also expected only from the family.

Having relatives in the town who can provide accomodation for students is a prerequisite for them to continue school or vocational training outside of the village. This is especially true for girls. Therefore it is important to take good care of family bonds.

Preserving family networks is in general important for both men and women. It is not surprising, therefore, that men as well as women lay constant emphasis on consanguinity, since they consider it their social capital (Bourdieu).

Even though family bonds are linked with confidence and economy for both men and women, their interests lie partly in different spheres. This is expressed in the way they talk about the family. Women frequently stress the emotional relationship with parents and brothers and sisters.

And indeed: For the women in the lake-dwellers' villages their relationship with the parents or their brothers has an entirely specific significance. This situation is in turn the result of the social division of labor and the social construction of the role of women in the fishing communities.

Ecology of space and the property conditions in the delta (arable land is owned by large landowners), determine the forms of reproduction in a Marxist sense.

Particularly in the lake-dwellers' villages, there is complete dependence on the small-scale inland fishing carried out by the men (Zapata 1979; Freiberg-Strauß 1989).

The traditional living patterns, born out of a fishing economy, determine the gender-specific division of labor and its organizational structures. The men are responsible for the family income and for securing the subsistence, the women for the household, care of small children, and education of the daughters. An expression of the "modern" way of life in the villages is the high estimation of education equivalent to school attendance and vocational training.

The education of girls is especially encouraged, while school attendance of the boys is interrupted when the father needs help in the boat.

Parents like if their daughters have a chance to receive vocational training. However, only the typical female professions are taken into account, that is nursing, teaching, selling.

Since only those with helpful relatives in town can start a vocational training, only very few daughters can take advantage of this opportunity. This difference in social capital gives these families more prestige.

The households in the lake-dwellers' villages are mainly three-generation households composed of several families. The house-community includes the unmarried children, even of adult age, and one or two married sons with their families, if they cannot afford a house or a boat of their own. In addition, a widowed daughter, or a daughter left by her partner frequently lives there with her children. They all live according to the patrilocal residence pattern, under the rule of the father, that is, the owner of the house.

The role of the male head of the household resembles the role of the patriarch from the colonial tradition more than the one of the father in European-type nuclear family. Despite the poverty, this economic predominance of the man, the house structure, and the authority of the patriarch lends special weight to the male role, even though the organization of everyday life within the family is solely the woman's task.

A paramount characteristic of the women of the fisher villages is their identification with the family. The main reason for this is doubtless that in adopting their specific gender role, the women also integrate an attitude of family orientation and a sense of duty towards the family. Since this role has been adopted in the course of a socialization process in a home atmosphere that is seen as friendly, relatively free of repression, and harmonious to many women, this role obviously assumes a positive emotional connotation. On the other hand, the consanguine family is the only place of refuge and security for women if their partner leaves them and the children, which often occurs.

Marriage-like relations or marriages are contracted very fast and at a very young age. Children present no obstacle if a man chooses to leave his wife, in particular if there was no formal marriage contract. Frequently, men have several sex relationships at the same time, which understandably leads to conflicts. In the case of separation, the woman usually has no other choice but to take upon herself the care of the children. In such situations, she can at best expect support and protection from her own family.

Within the framework of the socio-economic conditions as they exist in the lake-dwellers' villages, in which the women have no possibilities of gainful employment and usually have no vocational qualifications that would permit economic independence, their original family is a necessary guarantor of security. And it is the easiest and most preferable way of resolving problems. The organization of joint economic operations in a three-generation household enables the smooth reintegration of the daughter.

As we have seen, the fisher family, understood as a three-generation household, has fundamental economic importance. And this is true to the same extent for both women and men, even though, as already shown, for different purposes. As long as fishing is by far the only means of subsistence, the stability of the family is maintained. Where other economic factors supplement the family-based inland water fishing economy, the family begins to lose its cohesive force. One can see this in the coastal villages. Ideologies do not change, however, as fast as structures. The fishermen of the coastal villages also hold on to the family ideology, even though the behavior of many of them no longer corresponds to the family norms.

The definition of the female role in the fisher families corresponds basically with patriarchal structures. In cases where women are the heads of the family, they hold their position not due to their power, but because of the fact that men do not comply the family norms that they themselves propagate. What is it then, that makes men speak of the "matriarchy"? Men substantiate their assertions as follows:

- "Women have the say in the family. They have the authority in all essential matters; they organize everyday life".
- "Women are more educated; they are more eloquent. When they hold a public office, they do it with responsibility and perseverance".

These statements are certainly true. They are not evidence, however, of either the "power" of women, or the recognition of equal rights for women.

Discourse on women's power obviously has multiple functions which can sometimes be totally contradictory. The image of a woman as a powerful

mother is used in the families as a symbol and serves as an ideologically stabilizing factor for the institution "family", which in turn is of basic importance for the fishing economy. It also serves men, however, as an instrument in legitimizing sexual freedom, withdrawal from responsibility, and neglect of unpopular, time-consuming, and obviously unpleasant duties that go along with family and community life. However, the men retain their control and the power of decision.

Within the myth of the family, the myth of the woman as an ever-caring mother, responsible for managing the household affairs and bound to the family, is ideologized as women's nature.

The myth of masculinity is ambivalent: The man is the head of the household, responsible for the prosperity of the family, but he is also the strong, independent man who yields to his sexual desires, and his urge for freedom. Maintaining the myth of their specific gender role and leaving the domains of family and household to the women, men relinquish many duties and responsibilities. New developments in social life, e.g. the demand for school education, or even a higher degree of formal education, is easily integrated into the argument of legitimation. Men argue that ceding family matters to the women is acceptable, since they are "naturally" more suited to organization of household and family, and also because the women frequently attend school longer, making them more competent.

Therefore, numerous tasks in the community sector are willingly ceded to women, as long as these concern "traditional" women's areas: health, social matters, education. From the point of view of the fishermen, community life plays only a secondary role, since the decisive structures are those of family and kinship, as well as social networks built up by the individual.

From the point of view of the men and the family, conceding formal education to the women means adornment, prestige, and no loss of power for the man. School education on a low level neither enables the women to question the man's position of economic power, nor does it endanger his status.

For the women, this "classical" division of labor, linked with the economic predominance of the men, represents a type of "law of nature".

Women consider men's relinquishing of public tasks as an acknowledgement of their abilities. Informal economic activities requiring little educational training, e.g. selling home-made juices or *tamales* (cornmeal) do not represent essential criteria for special prestige, but are more the expression of economic need and boredom. In this respect the men do not strive for these activities, and do not consider them a sphere of competition for status.

Many women suspect that discourse on women's power hides the interests of men in legitimation. However, they enjoy the seductive deception. The women agree with the fiction. The consequence of the assignment of power is the construction of influence and prestige, however, without generating any real power. The women accept their gender roles as a law of nature. They are captives of the gender role assignment acquired in their socialization. They remain captives as long as the role assignment in everyday life is confirmed time and again, and as long as they regard the situation as an agreeable one.

Once the economic situation changes radically and the type of family based on the three-generation household loses its economic foundation, the specific assignment of women's gender role inside the family loses its function. When this happens women will stop giving their consent.

We can observe just that in the coastal villages. In contrast to the lake-dwellers' villages, small-scale fishing no longer predominates here. This undermines the traditional rationality for the stable family, which is a precondition for the position of the women.

In the coastal villages, fishing is complemented by greater integration in the market. Additional possibilities for gainful employment come from commerce, production, the service sector, or even from illegal business. Men also try to find employment in the city of Barranquilla and – at least temporarily – migrate there without their families. As a result, the family relationship loosens considerably and the role of the women changes. There, single-parent families headed by women are more common; in families headed by a male, tension and violence of men against women and children are on the rise.<sup>3</sup>

Women feel the effects of the fact that the three-generation household loses its economic base, and therefore, even the cohesive force of the family and the relatively safe position of women disappears. "Women's power" here signifies something different: increasing responsibility and an additional burden for women, who assume the functions of both head of the family and salary provider. Especially where women manage the stringent demands of everyday life, they also develop a more critical attitude regarding the definition of gender roles, as well as how to deal with male discourse concerning "the matriachy".

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<sup>3</sup>This follows from discussions that I had in 1992 in counseling centers, with guidance counselors of the Technical College in the city of Ciénaga, as well as with heads of day care centers (*madres comunitarias*) in the coastal villages.

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