2013

Dependence on or the Subordination of Women? Examining the Political, Domestic, and Religious Roles of Women in Mesoamerican, Andean, and Spanish Societies in the 15th Century

Christine Alwan
University of Dayton

Dependence on or the Subordination of Women?
Examining the Political, Domestic, and Religious Roles of Women in Mesoamerican, Andean, and Spanish Societies in the 15th Century

by
Christine Alwan

Honorable Mention

2013 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

What is the value of a woman? In the modern West, one may answer with appeals to human rights and the inherent dignity and equality of the human person. However, before the recognition of human rights, many societies' ideas about the value of women laid in the specific roles women played religiously, politically, and domestically within a particular society. Through the examination of women's roles in Mesoamerican Aztec society, Andean Incan society, and Spanish society in the 15th century, one is able to observe how gender ideology influenced the roles women played and how these roles had significant implications for personal freedom and the realization of women's human dignity.

Mesoamerican women exercised prominent roles within imperial Aztec society. According to *Women in Latin American and the Caribbean* by Marysa Navarro and Virginia Sanchez Korrol, the Aztec Empire fostered ideas about gender that promoted the equality of women in regards to their religious, political and domestic worth: "an ideology of male-female complementarity was maintained through an investment of the home with symbolism of war….complementarity and parallelism defined gender roles among the Aztecs….Men and women were considered to be genealogically and structurally equivalent" (Navarro and Korrol 10). This attitude of gender equality and parallelism, which was also prevalent in Andean culture, differed significantly from that of Spanish culture, which emphasized patriarchy and male dominance.

While there was an emphasis on gender parallelism, men occupied the highest ranks of Aztec religious life. However, the role of women within the religious structure was still significant:

> Women played a secondary role in public religious ritual and men occupied the highest positions in the priesthood…Almost half of the Mexica calendar was dedicated to goddesses. The Aztecs had numerous goddesses identified with fertility, nourishment, and agriculture – reflections, perhaps, of a past when the status of women was higher (Navarro and Korrol 13).

Additionally, women's domestic work had religious significance. This contributed to women's value within Aztec religious life. As Navarrow and Korrol state,

> Although they were not priestesses, women were responsible for maintaining the household shrines and performing rites, including sweeping, of vital importance in safeguarding the household from dangerous contamination (13-14).

Women were expected to perform their domestic rituals of cooking, cleaning, including sweeping, and childrearing, and these activities were considered symbolic and literal parallels to

the battlefield (Schroeder et al. 26-35). The Aztecs believed that failure to accomplish these tasks led to men's failure on the battlefield, as well as spiritual consequences. It is because of these spiritual implications that the Aztecs considered women domestic work to be so important:

> The religious orientation of Mexica culture thoroughly permeated the domestic context, such that the seemingly mundane work of running a household was imbued with symbolic meaning and hedged about with rules and omens. Housework was serious, and risky, business. The home, engendered as female space, was a place of power that, in its womblike darkness and its centrality, was the opposite of the bright and distant battlefield where the soldiers of the sun acted out their own cosmic drama (Shroeder et. al 52).

Aztec women's roles within the home were believed to be crucial to the military and logistical functioning of their society.

The Inca of the Andes also had similar attitudes about gender parallelism. Additionally, their society, far less militaristic than the Aztecs, involved more reciprocity with its subjects (Jaffe 1/29/2013). These ideas of parallelism and reciprocity, which promoted gender equality, were prevalent within the religious, political, and domestic structures of Incan society. In regards to religion, Navarro and Korrol state: "Inka religion featured parallel cults….Although men occupied the highest positions in the Inka priesthood, women also played a pre-eminent and distinctive religious role as *aqllas* ('Wives of the Sun')" (15-16). Like the Aztecs, Incan men were the highest-ranking religious leaders, with women playing significant albeit less powerful roles. The presence and significance of female goddesses within Incan society reflected their societal values of the significance, parallelism, and distinct social functions of the sexes.

Because of this parallel gender system, "Women conceived themselves as the descendants, through their mothers, of a line of women; men, in parallel fashion, saw themselves as descendants from their fathers in a line of men" (Silverblatt 5). This parallelism had significant implications for lines of political power and inheritance. Women were allowed to inherit land, belongings, and positions of power. However, as Incan society progressed, its gender-equal ideology began to evolve, especially when conquering neighboring peoples:

> The Incas, by using gender distinctions to frame relations through which the conquered were ordered and controlled, had begun converting gender differences into gender hierarchies….As the Incas tightened their grip over others, the imperial ideal of Andean manhood increasingly became the norm (Silverblatt 15).

This evolution had negative implications for women's rights and equality within Incan society. It caused their role to be considered valuable more in relation to their male counterpart than independently necessary for the healthy functioning of society.

In Andean society, the division of roles and responsibilities in the domestic sphere were was not as strict in Spanish society, and to a lesser degree, Aztec society. In Incan society, "the division of labor was never so strict as to prohibit one sex from doing the other's task if the need arose. Andean gender ideologies recognized that women's work and men's work complemented each other" (Silverblatt 9). Domestic activities such as weaving, cooking, and childrearing were not seen as forms of subordination to husbands but rather as equal partnerships within the home and within society (Silverblatt 9). Politics were no exception to this idea of gender parallelism. In fact, gender itself was a powerful political tool, according to Irene Silverblatt in *Moon, Sun, and Witches*:

> Gender ideologies were a powerful tool in cementing Inca dominion over the Andes. Their force was rooted and meshed with gender systems that pervasively shaped the social experience of Andean men and women (3).

However, with the evolution of political life to emphasize manhood, women began to lose their footing as equal and distinctly valued members of Incan society.

In conquest to pre-conquest Latin America, in Spanish society, women were viewed as significantly inferior to men. The gender parallelism of Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations was nonexistent. In *Iberian Women in the Old World and the New*, Susan Migden Socolow discusses women's role in Spanish society:

> All agreed that women were less intelligent, rational, and wise than men, a result of a nature governed by flesh rather than spirit….Not only mentally inferior, women were also morally fragile and prone to error….Popular culture and literature not only accepted this vision of women; it also stressed that women were inconsistent, gossipy, overly emotional, irrational, changeable, weak, prone to error, deceitful, and profligate" (Socolow 6).

These ideas about women, deemed as inherent sexual characteristics as opposed to imposed gender roles within a patriarchal society, influenced religious, political, and domestic life in Spanish societies.

Spanish society also placed significant emphasis on honor. A family maintained honor both through its social status, maintained and upheld through *limpieza de sangre*, also known as blood purity, as well as the virtue and reputation based on behavior of individual family members. This idea of blood purity was closely tied to honor and the preservation of an elite social class whose bloodline were not "tainted" with the blood of commoners or non-Christians (Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera 4-5). A woman's honor was determined by her sexual purity, being a virgin before marriage, and being a faithful wife who maintained blood purity through bearing

the children of suitable husbands (Johnson and Lipsett Rivera 4). Religious, political, and domestic structures sought to reinforce gender roles by providing strict physical boundaries to preserve women's honor, and thus the honor of entire families.

Because women were seen as more prone to temptation and weakness, enclosure was considered the best way of both preserving their honor and promoting their spiritual welfare. In *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville*, Mary Elizabeth Perry states,

> In this period of the Counter-Reformation, religious beliefs permeated gender ideology. Enclosure and purity developed as strategies for defending the faith at this time, for separating the sacred from the profane, and also for protecting the social order. Women, warned theologians, were especially vulnerable to temptations of the devil, and they required the special protection of enclosure (Perry 6).

This enclosure took place in two ways: within the home or within the convent. Women within the home were expected to prepare for matrimony and motherhood. Women sent to convents took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

These ideas about women's supposed flaws and need for enclosure, imposed by religion, influenced political life. Unlike the Andean and Mesoamerican peoples, the Spanish did not view women's roles to be parallel to those of men. Instead, they viewed men as mentally and physically superior, justifying their maintenance of political power. Furthermore, religious arguments from the Bible provided additional support for male dominance within political life (Perry 7). While a woman, especially one belonging to the elite, did have some legal status, this status was usually tied to the dominant male in her life: her father, brother, or husband. According to Navarro and Korrol, while "Widows shared all the rights of emancipated single women," married women were more limited. They were

> under the exclusive authority of the husband….They were therefore legally of the same status as slaves, Indians, criminals, the mentally retarded, and the insane….the restrictions placed "on women's activities were justified in terms of propriety and tradition" (49).

Any legal rights that a woman had were a result of the status of her husband, father, or brother. Unless she was widowed or legally emancipated, a woman in Spanish society was politically limited and legally dependent (Navarro and Korrol 48-49).

The Catholic religion thus played a significant role in ideas about gender, especially in portraying the Virgin Mary as the ideal woman, being both perpetual virgin and a wife and mother subservient to the men in her household. Perry says,

> Religion played a very political role in this period as it justified a gender system that supported the existing social order. Religious symbols of female martyrs promoted the belief that women should be self-sacrificing, giving themselves up to pain and humility for a higher cause (6).

Because Catholicism was so widespread within Spanish culture, Catholic ideas about womanhood significantly influenced gender roles within Spanish society.

Religion as a political tool was reinforced domestically, as women were expected to be obedient to their fathers and husbands in the home, to be good mothers and faithful wives, and to imitate the ideal of purity and domesticity: the Virgin Mary. This cult of domesticity was reinforced from childhood (Navarro and Korrol 46). Navarro and Korrol state,

> The education of elite women was largely limited by learning reading, writing, some arithmetic and some music, a few fundamentals of religious doctrine, how to manage a home properly, how to embroider, and how to accept the husbands chosen by their parents. Their lives were closely guarded, and they could not leave the home except in the company of *duenas,* chaperones who prevented them from meeting undesirable young men (47).

Women were trained their entire lives to serve the role as pure and obedient daughters and, eventually, either wives and mothers or religious sisters.

The roles women played in Mesoamerican, Andean, and Spanish societies were deeply rooted in religious ideas about women's sex characteristics. These religious ideas influenced the amount of political power women had. These ideas also influenced the value and meaning of domestic activities considered to be the sole function and purpose of women. Mesoamerican ideas about gender parallelism, similar to Andean gender ideologies, were in stark contrast to Spanish cultural ideas about the role of women. This would provide for a significant culture shock for the indigenous people post-conquest and challenges for the Spanish when trying to convert the indigenous peoples to their faith and way of life.

Works Cited

Jaffe, Tracey. "The History of Women in Latin America." United States, Dayton. 29 Jan. 2013. Lecture.

Johnson, Lyman L., and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera. *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico, 1998. Print.

Navarro, Marysa, and Korrol Virginia. Sanchez. *Women in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University, 1999. Print.

Perry, Mary Elizabeth. *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990. Print.

Schroeder, Susan, Stephanie Gail Wood, and Robert Stephen Haskett. *Indian Women of Early Mexico*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1997. Print.

Silverblatt, Irene. *Moon, Sun, and Witches: Gender Ideologies and Class in Inca and Colonial Peru*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1987. Print.

Socolow, Susan Migden. *The Women of Colonial Latin America*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.