

The Olla Común: A Study of Peruvian Gender Roles

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Ethnographic Field School, Utah State University, Summer 2017

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Introduction

I find myself sitting on a barstool like seat made from a concrete pillar that has an old pair of jeans serving as the cushion. The seat is placed at a table on the patio of a red house that survived the floods that occurred earlier in the year. One wall of the house has been replaced by plastic sheeting and there is a small garden behind me. Across the dirt road there is the space that use to be a plaza that is now filled with debris. The seat is not the most comfortable thing in the world, but it serves its purpose as it is a relief to sit down after being on my feet for a while at the Olla Común, the research site for our field school. While seated I had the privilege of watching Rafael Vasquez, a local anthropologist, conduct asset questionnaire interviews with three members of the community. His ability to get the most out of the interviewee in a timely fashion while still being considerate to the interviewee and understanding of the fact that questions may elicit difficult answers makes him a great interviewer. Watching him also makes for a wonderful learning opportunity. Two out of the three interviews my fellow classmates and I watched Rafael conduct that day stood out to me. This is because the interviewees, with their previous work experiences and future endeavors, challenged the traditional gender roles in Peruvian society.

The main question driving this ethnography is: how do the members of the Olla Común, a community kitchen in El Milagro, go along with, or challenge, the traditional gender roles in Peru? The question came about through the asset questionnaire interviews that were just a part of the multiple interviews we did with the people who make up the Olla Común in El Milagro. These questionnaires were developed by our class as part of a field school put on by Utah State University in Huanchaco, Peru and will be further explained in the Methods section. Meeting the people mentioned above is what stemmed the initial question for this ethnography. This ethnography will study how traditional gender roles have been reinforced or challenged in modern times.

Data gathered through participant-observation of brick making, a male dominated task, and unobtrusive observation of women's activities, like cooking and handicraft making have proven that gender roles are being reinforced. However, I then argue that the Olla Común has given women agency. Due to the nature of the work at the Olla Común, women have taken on

more leadership roles than the men. Finally, this ethnography will challenge the traditional gender roles of Peru with two case studies, one man and one woman, who, through their asset questionnaire interviews show in their past work and future endeavors, that they do not abide by the traditional gender roles of Peru.

Site Description/Background

El Milagro is a town in the Huanchaco district of the La Libertad region in Peru. Settled in the last few decades, the town is situated about ten kilometers north of Huanchaco. This is where the research for this ethnography took place during the month of June 2017, but the field site was more specifically the Olla Común. The Olla Común is located slightly south of El Milagro proper. It is a small community kitchen that serves around forty-two families who have stayed in El Milagro after the devastating floods that occurred in the first few months of 2017.

Looking out from the Olla Común there are very few structures that survived the floods. Most of these are made of brick, reinforced concrete, adobe, or a combination of all three materials. A majority of the adobe houses and buildings that existed before the floods are gone. The ones that survived have been reinforced with a stronger material, such as concrete or plaster. The first visit to El Milagro and the Olla Común is a very humbling feeling. I was instantly affected by the amount of destruction I saw and realized that many of the people I was about to meet had lost many of their possessions, if not everything.

That humbling feeling becomes greater when you meet the people of the Olla Común. The first day at the field site our group was greeted with huge smiles and warm personalities. Over the last five weeks we have been given flowers, scarves, foods, and handicrafts. The only items we paid for were the beautiful handicrafts. Without the people of the Olla Común this

ethnography and the other ethnographies written by members of our field school would not have been possible. I am grateful that they allowed me and my fellow classmates to spend a few hours a week with them.

Gender roles and the sexual division of labor have always existed in Peru. During the time of the Inca Empire women had their specific tasks, but the society was more egalitarian. The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 1530s changed this egalitarian societal structure. With the Spanish Conquest, the culture became more patriarchal.¹ Great change, in terms of gender roles, was not brought by Peru cutting its ties with the Spanish in 1821. It only reinforced the already existing ideals.² The 1980s saw a shift of gender roles in Peru due to the rise in attacks by the Shining Path, the Peruvian Communist Party, and increased migration. This led to many migrants to form households where women were the heads of house.³

Literature Review

Jung-Won Kang, from the University of Florida, writes about gender roles and the rural-urban divide in the Peruvian Andes through four case studies completed in the district of San Marcos. In the rural areas where Kang conducted research the division of labor is remarkable. The men's arena is associated with field work and wage labor. Women are typically tasked with animal care, complementary agricultural work, and reproductive labor.⁴ Kang also identifies

¹ Pam Barrett, *Peru* (Long Island City: Langenscheidt Publishers, Inc., 2004), https://books.google.com.pe/books?id=aUWThg8JWtIC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, 83.

² John Crabtree, *Peru* (Herndon: Stylus Publishing LLC, 2002), https://books.google.com.pe/books?id=_JoOSdXz9McC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, 10.

³ Barrett, *Peru*, 83.

⁴ Jung-Won Kang, "Gender Roles and Rural-Urban Divide in the Peruvian Andes: An Analysis of the District of San Marcos," *Latin-amerikayeongu (Latin American Studies)*, 23, no. 2 (2010): 136, accessed on June 27, 2017, <http://www.ajlas.org/v2006/paper/2010vol23no204.pdf>.

common themes throughout the lives of the four women interviewed. The first two women had jobs that were centered on cooking and serving food either in a restaurant or out of their homes.⁵ The fourth woman worked as a housemaid and servant in a small restaurant. She also sold homemade *chicha*, a traditional Peruvian fermented beverage made from corn, in the market.⁶ In all four case studies, which were conducted in both the town and rural areas, men were the breadwinners.⁷

Kang then goes into general trends that were found through the case studies, the town, and rural areas. These were: women had full responsibility of reproductive labor; men were the ones who made up and represented their households at community organizations; and women were in charge of the household economy while the men oversaw the cash economy.⁸ Other takeaways from Kang's research are that labor associated with agricultural production were divided up by sex, age, and availabilities.⁹ Kang's work helps in the understanding of the gender roles of Peru and applies them to a case study in the Peruvian Andes.

Regarding gender roles in natural disaster and post natural disaster situations, Revathi I. Hines writes about the 2004 tsunami that hit multiple countries in Africa and Asia while using India as a case study. The largest impact was that casualties, in terms of death caused by the tsunami, of women outnumbered those of men in India and around the world.¹⁰ Women were impacted differently than men because of the traditional divisions of labor and the impacts of a

⁵ Kang, "Gender Roles," 122-125.

⁶ Kang, "Gender Roles," 127-128.

⁷ Kang, "Gender Roles," 129.

⁸ Kang, "Gender Roles," 133-141.

⁹ Kang, "Gender Roles," 132.

¹⁰ Revathi I. Hines, "Natural Disasters and Gender Inequalities: The 2004 Tsunami and the Case of India," *Race, Gender, & Class* 14, no. 1/2 (2007): 62-63, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41675195>.

patriarchal society and gender socializations.¹¹ The situation women had to deal with after the tsunami in temporary shelters and camps was vastly different from the men. Due to unbearably high temperatures in some areas of Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, women ran the risk of falling victim to heat exhaustion if they slept inside the temporary shelters. Abuse, both physical and sexual, directed towards women was rampant in these settlements due to the lack of privacy. The women were forced to choose between these two extremes. Most chose to sleep outside knowing they were risking the chance of abuse instead of falling victim to heat exhaustion.¹²

Hines' article is useful to compare the experiences of the women of India and the women of the Olla Común. Unlike the women in Hines' study, the women of the Olla Común outnumber the men and do not seem to be the victims of abuse. This cannot be said for certain, but it never came up during ethnographic research. A similarity between the two case studies is that women assumed leadership roles after the natural disaster.¹³ Women became the leaders of their households and took up traditional men's roles in Hines' study which is similar to the female leaders of the Olla Común.

Another contribution to the understanding of post natural disaster situations is the work done by Daanish Mustafa on the 2001 flood and its aftermath in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The article mainly shows that women were the ones who showed most concern in all aspects of life following the flood. The women saw that the flood would clean the Lai Nullah creek and the surrounding area, they were concerned with rebuilding homes, and more concerned with the possibility of future floods than the men were.¹⁴ The annual floods would clean the area by

¹¹ Hines, "Natural Disasters and Gender Inequalities," 63.

¹² Hines, "Natural Disasters and Gender Inequalities," 64-65.

¹³ Hines, "Natural Disasters and Gender Inequalities," 65.

¹⁴ Daanish Mustafa, "Reinforcing vulnerability? Disaster relief, recovery, and response to the 2001 flood in Rawalpindi, Pakistan," *Environmental Hazards* 5 (2003): 75-79, accessed on June 27, 2017.

removing trash which reduced the possibility of some diseases, something that the government did not do. Women in Rawalpindi wanted to rebuild homes because the handicrafts they sold were associated with the home and they could make money by selling these crafts.¹⁵ The data gathered by Mustafa points to a gendered difference in experiences of the disaster, its causes, and expectations of relief and recovery.¹⁶ Some female members of the Olla Común have similar micro-enterprises and small-scale manufacturing endeavors.

Methods

The three different types of methods used in this ethnography are participant observation, unobtrusive observation, and asset questionnaire interviews conducted with members of the Olla Común. The asset questionnaires were developed by my classmates and me. The intent of these questionnaires was to figure out what the people of the Olla Común had before and still have after the floods. The other purposes of the questionnaire were to allow the members of the community to figure out what assets they had, give them agency to use these assets, and figure out how the field school could best use the money collected from the fundraiser we organized. The “assets” addressed in the questionnaire ranged from skills such as office work, health care, family care, food experience, art, etc. to things they could provide for the community. The questionnaire started with basic census and demographic data then turned to questions about previous work, education, licenses/certifications held, reasons for coming to El Milagro, etc. The questionnaire went on to ask the interviewee to list their skills based on previously created categories, ask if they had anything to contribute to the community, and ended with the interesting and open-ended question of what does the interviewee value most. These interviews

¹⁵ Mustafa, “Reinforcing vulnerability?,” 79-80.

¹⁶ Mustafa, “Reinforcing vulnerability?,” 80.

were conducted by Rafael and the three Spanish speaking members of the field school.

Typically, as the interviews were taking place three or four students from the field school would participate as well. In addition to taking notes, they would chime in or ask further questions about anything they found interesting.

I used both methods of participant and unobtrusive observation to gather data for this ethnography. Unobtrusive observation with slight participant observation was done throughout the time spent with the members of the Olla Común. The intention with these unobtrusive observations was to get a feel for what the community was like and understand the gender roles present in the community. Through this I was able to pick up on the gender dynamic that exists within the Olla Común. How both men and women either challenge or reinforce the traditional gender roles of Peru as well as the agency the Olla Común gives women can be picked up on through unobtrusive observation.

Participant observation was done throughout the time at the Olla Común, but the most important instance for this ethnography occurred on June 22, 2017. The observation was done with one of male brick makers situated behind the physical space of the Olla Común. While doing my participant observation I got to tour the areas bricks were made, look at the large kiln used for cooking adobe bricks, and make four adobe bricks after watching the master brick maker go through the process a few times. This experience allowed me to pick up on the traditional gender roles that are being filled by men at the Olla Común.

Data and Data Analysis

The data collected for this ethnography does three fascinatingly different things all at once. It reinforces the traditional gender roles of Peru, shows that the women of the Olla Común have agency, while simultaneously challenging the traditional gender roles of Peru.

Traditional Gender Roles

The observations made at the Olla Común that focused on the women show them as filling the traditional gender roles of Peru. A few of the women produce beautiful handicrafts, scarves, and other products that contribute to micro-enterprises, like the ones run by the women in Rawalpindi, Pakistan after the 2001 flood. The women oversee their own micro-enterprises, but the tasks they are doing are considered women's work and I would certainly be surprised if I saw a male member of the Olla Común making these on his own. The women are also the ones in charge of cooking and serving the food every day. Our field school visited during a few meal times and only really witnessed women preparing and serving food. The men did not really do much during these times. There was one man who was only seen on the days we went at meal times. He would sit around for a while not talking to anyone and would leave after he got his meal. A lot of people did this, but he really stood out to me because he did not seem to directly contribute to the meal he was provided and left after receiving it. Despite cooking and serving being traditionally women's tasks, some men did contribute to the meal. According to the women, some of the men would provide the water and the firewood necessary for the meal. It is good that the men are contributing to the meals in this way, but it is not the cooking and serving that is done by the women in similar ways to the women in Kang's case studies. One funny instance of a male crossing the societal gender roles came when one of the male members of our field school decided to help serve food one day at lunch. No one told him that he was not able to

help, but he got some laughs because he was doing what is traditionally a women's task or when he did not give out the correct portions.

The men of the Olla Común are the ones that reinforce traditional gender roles the most. A popular job around the Olla Común is brick making. Adobe bricks, either sun dried or cooked in a kiln, are a popular building material used in El Milagro. While doing my participant observation with the master brick maker behind the Olla Común it was easy to notice that only men were brick makers. Men were the only people seen making, drying, cooking, and transporting the bricks. The makeup of my fellow classmates who walked around with me was gendered as well. Five out of the six people who walked around with me were male which points to the nature of the work we witnessed. This participant observation was done leading up to lunch time on that day we went to the Olla Común. While walking around, Rafael stated what came out to be that it is Peruvian for the men to be working and the women cooking. This was a powerful moment in my research because the comment was made by someone who has been working in the region for years and who has a wealth of knowledge about Peruvian society past and present.

The process of brick making is an interesting one that has some similarities to making pizza dough. You start by drying the wet spots on the mold, from the previous set of bricks, with sand. The use of sand continues as you throw sand on the tarp in front of the abode pile to keep it from sticking, just like how flour is used to keep pizza dough from sticking. You then knead the abode into a ball shape that will go into the four sections of the mold. The ball of adobe needs to be thrown down in to the mold with some force for it to stay in the mold. After filling the four molds you need to clear off the excess adobe and smooth out the top. The mold is then run over to the lines of bricks to be placed down with some force. You then remove the top with

care. It was wonderful experience for me, but it was difficult. From watching and then attempting the process I can tell that the brick maker who taught me has been making bricks for a long time.



Me rolling the wet adobe as the master brick maker watches. Photo by Gavin Whaley.

The fact that brick making is only done by the men and that women are the only ones cooking and serving food reinforces the traditional gender roles of Peru.

The Olla Común as Catalyst for Women's Agency

Women of the Olla Común are working in traditional roles, but this aspect does give the female members agency. The nature of the work, being that the Olla Común is a community kitchen, puts women in a position of power within this newly-formed community. They are the ones in charge of the process of cooking and serving, so they have say in how the food is distributed. Luckily, they have decided to evenly distribute the food, but, as pessimistic as it is, they could very easily decide to cut some families out for various reasons. The food they serve

is the only food the community is eating. By deciding how the food is rationed they truly have people's fate and lives in their hands.

This agency can be seen in how the women responded to the male member of our field school asking to help serve food. They allowed him to do so, but he did not fall into a leadership role. He was told how much to serve and became the student to the female teacher who was serving rice. This leadership position while cooking and serving food transfers to the leadership of the entire Olla Común. After the first trip to the Olla Común it became easy to tell that the women were the ones in leadership positions. This observation is similar to the ones made by Hines and Mustafa about the post natural disaster situations in India and Pakistan.

The women, in the first few weeks of visiting the Olla Común, were the ones concerned about rebuilding while the men seemed almost aimless. This gradually changed and by the fourth week men were seen making building materials. The women are the ones who attempt to deal with government. They are also the ones Rafael calls to schedule our field school visits. The nature of the work done in the Olla Común has given women control over the cooking and serving of food. That agency has transferred to them taking on leadership positions in the community as well.



Women of the Olla Común serving lunch next to the makeshift stove the meal was prepared at.

The last part of the data for this ethnography comes from the asset questionnaire interviews done during our last few weeks of research at the Olla Común. The two case studies that follow stem from two interviews conducted by Rafael with one man and one woman. My attention was drawn to these interviewees because they, with their past job experiences and future endeavors, challenge the traditional gender roles of Peru.

Challenging Traditional Gender Roles

The first case study looks at a twenty-eight-year-old male member of the Olla Común. His previous work experience is standard for a male member of the community. He has experience in farming, shop keeping, painting, and construction, as well as being a mechanic. His skills, specifically food related, and his future endeavors are what stand out to me. He responded with a “yes” to having seven of the nine skills that fall under the food category. These skills include: Cooking and serving for many, cooking, bartending, hunting, fishing, and gardening/planting. This is significant because he has three more skills listed than the next two highest males interviewed. Four out of the six males interviewed had three or less food related

skills. Regarding his future endeavors, he stated that he would like to learn professional cooking skills and would like to be able to cook for the community. He also would like to own a restaurant one day. These skills and ambitions are direct challenges to the traditional gender roles in Peru. Kang's work in Peru and my observations done at the Olla Común show that cooking is traditionally a women's role, but through the asset questionnaire we found out that a male member of the Olla Común has a majority of the food related skills listed and would one day like to open a restaurant. He directly challenges the gender roles of Peru with the skills he already has and his future aspirations.

The second case study focuses on a thirty-one-year-old female member of the Olla Común. She has done many things throughout her life. Her previous job experience ranges from shoe maker to hotel administrator. She has licensures/certifications for heavy machinery operation and a certificate of training in obstetrics. She has also supervised the human resource department for a factory where her responsibilities included fixing electrical problems when they occurred. In the skills section of her asset questionnaire she replied with a "yes" to having at least one skill in all but one of the ten categories. That category was transportation. It is truly impressive to see anyone with that wide variety of skills. She is also the president of the Olla Común. She was present every time our field school visited and was always someone who was talked to. Just like the male in the first case study, she is a direct challenge to the traditional gender roles in Peru. The large leadership role she holds is the biggest challenge to traditional gender roles. The skills she has along with her previous job experiences and the current position she holds make her a great example to challenge gender roles. The argument that women become the leaders in post natural disaster communities raised by Hines and Mustafa is greatly shown through this wonderful woman.

Conclusion

The traditional gender roles of Peru that have existed since the Spanish conquest in the 1530s can be reinforced and challenged. As evidenced by this paper, the Olla Común in El Milagro is a community that can do both simultaneously. Typically, the work done by the men and women of the community falls into the traditional gender roles of Peru, with the men engaged in manual labor (e.g., making bricks) and the women cooking. However, the nature of the work at the Olla Común has given the female members agency and some have taken on leadership roles. The man and woman in the case studies are great challenges to the traditional gender roles of Peru. One question I still have is, why were the men not involved in rebuilding the community for the first few weeks of our research? The women seemed to have more ambition than the men early on.

This ethnography can help our understanding of gender roles in post natural disaster communities. The fact that women take on more leadership roles in these communities needs to be addressed at greater length. Women are the natural leaders when it comes to post natural disaster communities, as Hines and Mustafa pointed out, and I also discovered in my five weeks of fieldwork in this Peruvian community. This fact needs to be better understood by relief and recovery agencies, as it would hopefully improve post natural disaster communities for women, increase relief and recovery programs centered on women, and add to the knowledge base on post natural disaster communities.

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