

EXPLORING THE GENDER DIVISION OF LABOR IN THE WOOD CARVING INDUSTRY OF PAETE, LAGUNA

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the wood carving process in Paete, Laguna in terms of its division of labor and gender dimension. It also seeks to identify the reasons that lead to the level of participation of women in the said industry. Qualitative methodology was utilized to address the objectives of this research through interviews with key-informants, wood carvers, and business owners. Results revealed that the wood carving industry in Paete is dominated by men. The core processes of carving are performed mainly by men while the finishing processes are performed by women. Women's institutionalized secondary role in wood carving, their physical limitations, the existence of Pagtataka in which women engage instead, and finally, their reproductive roles at home are the unearthed reasons for the low participation of women in the wood carving. Recommendations are presented towards the end of the study.

Keywords: wood carving, gender division of labor, Paete

INTRODUCTION

Wood carving products have been the distinguished commodities raised by the municipality of Paete in the province of Laguna (Fernandez, 2014). In fact, on March 15, 2005, former President Gloria Arroyo declared the municipality as the “Carving Capital of the Philippines.” According to Datol (2001), most of the wood carvers in Paete are third-generation wood working folks indicating that their wood working skills have been passed on to succeeding generations.

The process of wood carving often involves both men and women (Chibnik, 2003; Makawa, 2009). However, the industry has been dominated by men, as in the case of Namibia’s wood carving industry (Suich & Murphy, 2002; Owomoyela, 2002 as cited in Fadiman, 2008). In Malaysia, successful wood carving entrepreneurs are men (Hassan et al, 2013). Moreover, in Mexico, even though much of the work on Oaxacan wood carvings is done by women, almost all the best know artisans are men (Chibnik, 2011) and often only the man’s name is written on the piece even if both men and women worked on the sculpture (Chibnik, 2003). Thus, as is found worldwide, wood carving and trade is mostly male dominated (Shackleton & Shackleton, 2003).

An empirical study by Nansereco (2010) in a study on a gender perspective to value chain analysis for wood-furniture industry in Central Java, Indonesia concluded that both male and female workers are actively involved in carving but the core processes are mainly done by men while supporting activities are done by women. This case is also similar to Kenyan and South African wood carvers where the supporting role of women in the carving process is evident (Mutinda & Kimbuku, 2014; Steenkamp, 1999). Also, for many years in Vietnam, rural women were not welcome to be a part of the wood carving industry (Phuong Le, 2009). However, since the 1990s, women have been more involved in the industry to varying degrees—as carvers, shopkeepers, business managers, and entrepreneurs (Phuong Le, 2009; Chan, 2011). According to Chan (2011), Vietnamese men and women alike agree that carving should be a man’s work because of the strength and skill required. Though the engagement of women in the wood carving industry differs slightly from place to place, for the most part, men are involved in the wood carving itself and women are involved in the finishing, painting, management, shop keeping, and entrepreneurial side of the industry.

This study seeks to examine such gender role differentiation in the case of Paete, Laguna since little is known about the gender dimension of wood carving industry of Paete. Specifically, it aims to identify the gender division of labor in the wood carving process and to determine the reasons behind the participation of women in the process of wood carving.

METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of the study's objectives, this research necessitates the use of a qualitative methodology. The researchers utilized key-informant interviews with the Paete mayor, head of the Tourism Office, and the president of the Paete Artists' Guild along with in-depth interviews with eight individuals engaged in wood carving. All interviews were recorded in order to provide important verbatim responses in the analysis. Thematic analysis was utilized by the researchers in order to identify recurring themes from the responses of the interviewees and to answer the objectives of this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gender Division of Labor

Based on the interviews, Paete wood carvers follow the following steps in the wood carving process: *Padron* or *Plantilya*, *Pagbabantso*, *Pagbabagbag*, *Pagdedetalye*, *Pagkikinis*, and *Pagbabarnis* or *Pagpipinta*. Some of the interviewees only identified four steps, starting with *Pagbabantso* and ending with *Pagkikinis*. Whether or not the *Pagbabarnis* or *Pagpipinta* step is done depends upon the request of the customer.

During the first step, *Padron* or *Plantilya*, the wood carvers sketch and plan the whole form of the sculpture. This gives them a guide for themselves before they start wood carving. The patterns that they make are usually drawn on cardboard or carton and cut out to create a stencil. Some designers include the measurements so that the piece will be perfectly in proportion. However, Paeteños who are considered master carvers do not always use this process because it is no longer necessary for them to use a stencil. They simply rely on their imaginations and proceed to carving. The second step in the carving process is called *Pagbabantso*. This is where the carvers use a machine called the band saw. They shape a big block of wood into its basic form and size by cutting it using the machine. All excess wood is removed.

Some carvers give measurements to their helpers or resource people and allow them to do this task. Once the piece of wood is cut to the correct size, they start carving. The third step, *Pagbabagbag*, is when the wood carvers do rough forming with their hand tools. After this stage, the sculpture is not yet appealing because of its rough edges. That is why there is a need for the fourth step, *Pagdedetalye* or “detailing” which is considered the most crucial part of the wood carving process. It can be very challenging because the carver must decide which tool is appropriate to detail the specific form or element of design. In this stage, the common tools used by Paeteños to cut the wood are gauges, chisels, veiners, v-tools, fluteronis, macaroni tools, and knives. The carvers also use mallets or hammers, saws, and sharpening stones. The fifth step, *Pagkikinis*, is the stage where carvers finally get rid of the sharp angles and create smooth forms. When the sculpture is smooth, they proceed to the sixth step, *Pag-aas-is* or *Pagliliha*. In the sixth step, the smooth texture of the sculpture is achieved through the use of different kinds of sandpaper. After this, the carvers put the sculptures on a drying stage and wait for the innermost wood to dry out completely. Sometimes the wood has already been dried in the beginning stages. The last step, *Pagbabarnis* or *Pagpipinta*, is when the carver gives life to the masterpiece with varnish or paint. Carvers use different colors, which are carefully chosen for the design that they made. Helpers or resource people, who may be women, often do this step. The finishing techniques in this stage are not just to beautify the carving, but to preserve it as well. As Valdellon (2014) stated, varnish and paint are crucial steps in making a beautiful and realistic masterpiece.

In Paete’s wood carving process, the major steps (i.e., Padron, *Pagbabantso*, *Pagbabagbag*, and *Pagdedetalye*) are performed by men. Men’s skills are very much needed in the said steps. Their expertise on the use of the necessary tools such as gauges, chisels, veiners, v-tools, fluteronis, macaroni tools, knives, hammers, and saws, for *Pagdedetalye* for example, has been shaped by years and years of experience. Many men were taught these techniques during childhood, which results in a skill gap between men and women for this kind of work. This is similar to the observation of Nansereco (2010) regarding the skill gap between male and female workers in Jepara (Central Java, Indonesia) and the effects on their respective returns to labor.

It is very apparent that the last two steps, *Pagkikinis* and *Pagbabarnis* or *Pagpipinta*, are done by women. Compared to the main carving activities, these are relatively lighter activities that can easily be done by women. One of the interviewees explained that women are very attentive to details which are helpful in the finishing touches of the product.

“Sa umpisa ng carving, lalaki pero sa finishing babae. Kaya ng babae ay magpinta kasi okay sila sa details. Mahirap para sa babae na magbuhat ng troso, magpabanso, maglagari at mag-ukit nyan. Siguro hindi capable ang babae, ang trabaho ng babae ay mag-isis, magpinta, yan lang ang ginagawa nila.”

(“At the start, men do the work but women take over at the finishing stage. They are keen to detail. They are not capable to carve because they will have a difficulty in carrying, cutting, and carving the wood. They can only do the finishing touches.”)

It is surprising that some men also do these steps (Pagkikinis and Pagbabarnis or Pagpipinta) because these steps are viewed as the more feminine tasks. The respondents stated that the carving itself boosts the “machismo” of the Paete men. It is innate in the Filipino culture that men do the physical activities. Their strength determines their status in the society. It was therefore not surprising when one of the interviewees said that if a man does the Pagkikinis, he is not very manly.

“Dito sa Paete, kung ang nagliliha ay lalake, yun ay alanganing lalaki.”

(“In Paete, if the man does the finishing, his sexuality is questionable.”) Also, according to one of the women interviewed, approximately seven out of ten doing this step are women:

“Pagkinis na, binabarnisan; may portion, portion na yun. Karamihan babae na gumagawa nyan. Minsan may lalaki pero kadalasan babae. Nagsisimula sa pagliliha, babae na ang nakatoka. Kung i-approximate, seven out of ten ay babae.”

(“When it comes to finishing and varnishing, helpers could be tapped. Most of them are female and if I give you an approximate, seven out of ten. Some males also do this work.”)

Our interviews strongly suggest the domination of the men in the wood carving process. Most of the male respondents were exposed to the activity in their youth. This has helped them to hone their skills and master their craft. This is contrary to the women whose participation is in the finishing stage of the process. This has been the practice in this industry and has eventually “left out” the women.

Reasons for Low Participation of Women in the Wood Carving Process

In Paete, the gender division of labor in the wood carving industry reflects a typical society where men are the primary actors. This is also true in most wood carving communities, as explained previously. However, the researchers met some female wood carvers in Paete. According to one of the respondents, there are few women carvers in the locality but they are not physically able to carve larger carvings.

Four reasons were unearthed to explain the low participation of women in doing the actual carving process. First is the established role of women in wood carving. It has been a practice in the community that men do the main process while the Pagkikinis and Pagbabarnis or Pagpipinta are performed by women. It is their belief that women just supplement what the men have accomplished in the process. This stage of the work is also less profitable. Thus, men just let the women do the said tasks. It is also very rare to have a man who does the Pagkikinis or Pagbabarnis step. Paete has a high regard for tradition in the wood carving industry and men are the cultural icon.

It is in accordance with masculine and feminine stereotypes in the society that individuals also behave. This is further solidified by the normative and evaluative eyes that reify the concept of gender roles in a society. Pulling and Stark (2000) explained that people either comply with gender role stereotypes (which create cultural expectations and obligations) or internalize them (in which case, the stereotype will be assimilated to self-identity. Whether externally or internally generated, behavior under the regulatory impact of gender role stereotypes will exhibit predictable patterns (Uzzell and Horne, 2006). For instance, women in Paete are expected to be secondary in the wood carving process, thus most of the work are done by men. Being dubbed as the masculine in relation to their role in the process, this has been inscribed in the minds and culture of Paeteños.

Second is the physical limitation of women. Wood carving requires a lot of physical strength. This is the recurring response from the respondents who said that "Women don't carve." According to the interviewees, the early stages involving working with hardwood are only suitable for the capacity of men.

According to Escott and Whitfield (2002), the same two gender role constructions predict vocational choice and aspirations, domestic division of labor, working patterns and schedules, leadership style, and so on. However, this should not limit the choices of individuals due to these gender role constructions.

Nor does it imply that there are many other iterations of gender role unaccounted for by the terms masculinity and femininity (Uzzel and Horne, 2006). What it means that this eases the organization of gender preferences among men and women in a manner that significantly captured by the term of masculinity and femininity. In the case of woodcarvers in Paete, the societal construction of the needed strength for the vocation is best portrayed by men thus, a reiteration of the prime status of men in the said industry.

The third reason explaining the low participation of women in the wood carving industry is a complementary craft called Pagtataka (paper mache) or the art of Taka making. This alternative livelihood makes use of paper as the raw material for the products. Producing multiple paper mache objects (Takas) requires carving hardwood sculptures which are used as wooden molds. The molds are waxed and then pieces of brown paper or newspaper are laid upon the forms and dried (Kangas & Kangas, 2001). The process is relatively simpler and easier than wood carving, which seems to be why women are more involved in Taka making. The finished paper forms provide a source of income which is a good livelihood option for women. The Taka also showcases the creativity of the designers. Women are recognized as the frontrunners of the Taka industry, and like the wood carving industry, their products have reached global markets. (Kangas & Kangas, 2001).

The final hindrance for women to delve into carving is their reproductive role. A woman's role in rural areas like Paete is to do the household work and take care of the children rather than being productive in the economic aspect, especially outside the home. According to a key informant, Mr. Joseph Bañez, President of Paete Artists Guild:

"Carving is a man's job." But since this is art...Marami (babae) me hilig, pero pag nag-asawa na me obligasyon na sa pamilya...lay low na ang mga babae dahil me anak na. Mahirap maging ina...because you cannot work (in carving) for just 15 minutes per day. Mahabang oras ang kailangan..."

("Carving is a man's job. But since this is art...there are a lot of women who have inclination to carving but when they get married they have already responsibility with the family...they stop carving because of their children. It is very hard to be a mother...because you cannot work (in carving) for just 15 minutes per day. A lot of time is required (in carving)...")

The identified reasons for low participation of women in the wood carving industry of Paete still show Paeteños adherence to traditional view of gender in the context of the work environment. It has been highlighted that the participants recognize women as individuals who more or less only capable of doing lighter tasks while men are the physically strong ones who have the ability to carve big sculptures. The idea that carving is a man's job and women are only better in doing paper mache also speaks of how the said industry is gendered and how gender inequality resides in the minds of the participants or of the people of Paete in general. This view limits women's participation in wood carving and hinders them from showcasing their carving skills. The roles given to women in the wood carving process are not the very crucial ones. They only serve as the assistants of the male woodcarvers, thus women's roles are merely secondary.

Moreover, the issue revealed in this study is not only about the physical incapability of women to carve big sculptures but also their reproductive role. Paeteños recognize the importance of women in the reproductive sphere. The conventional view that women should stay at home and take care of the family is still very strong in this small community. This speaks of lack of women empowerment in the wood carving industry and this opens the possibility that women will continue to be eliminated in the said industry and merely focus on the traditional roles attached by the society.

SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results of the study reveal that traditional gender roles constrain women from participating in the wood carving process. This appears to be due to women's institutionalized secondary role in wood carving, their physical limitations, the existence of Pagtataka in which women engage instead, and finally, their reproductive roles at home.

The main limitation of the study is that it only analyzed the whole wood carving process but those beyond it such as marketing and finance management as well as the study on the source of raw materials or the backward link in the value chain process of the wood carving are beyond the scope of this research. Future research may want to explore these steps.

Given these findings, three recommendations are proposed in terms of policy making. First, the Local Government should provide wood carving trainings and workshops that highly encourage the participation of women and girls. In addition, a regular exhibit of their artworks should be showcased. Second, the Paete Artists' Guild should actively recruit female members to encourage the participation of more women in the industry. The association having only 16 active members as of 2015 has a critical role in gaining the active participation of women as part of their objective of strengthening the organization and promoting the Paete's wood carving as an art and as a means of livelihood. Finally, the Gender Office should allot budget that supports women-owned small businesses and women-owned small business start-ups. Fourth, secondary schools in Paete should include wood carving in the technical, vocational, and livelihood track in their curriculum.

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