
“If I Really Were a Witch”: Narratives of Female Power in a Coastal Galician Community

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Abstract: In this paper, I call into question anthropological connotations of coastal Galician women’s power as “absolute” and as based on the “matrifocal” family. My problematization of the main assumptions that underlie unambiguous theoretical assessments of women’s power is drawn from the complexities and paradoxes revealed in five women’s own accounts of the making of their *casas*, what I am calling their household narratives. The details and reflections contained in these narratives lead me to develop alternative conclusions about the relationship between kinship practice and gender politics in the coastal Galician village of Ezaro.

Résumé: Cet article met en doute les assertions des anthropologues qui laissent entendre que le pouvoir des femmes de la Galice est «absolu» et qu’il provient d’une famille «matrifocale». Mon traitement des principaux postulats qui sous-tendent les évaluations théoriques catégoriques du pouvoir des femmes s’appuie sur les complexités et les paradoxes révélés dans les récits de cinq femmes qui racontent l’établissement de leur *maison*, ce que j’appelle leur *narration de maisonnée*. Les détails et les réflexions contenus dans ces récits me conduisent à des conclusions différentes sur les relations entre les pratiques reliées à la parenté et les pratiques reliées à la position des sexes à Ezaro, un village de la côte de la Galice.

“If I really were a witch . . .” Ana, a woman from the coastal Galician village of Ezaro where I have conducted field work since 1985, would often exclaim to me. “If I really were a witch,” Ana would sigh agonizingly, “then my husband and son would not be working in London. They would be here with me, where they belong!”

Ana, a former emigrant who returned to her natal village of Ezaro after working in England for 12 years, might be seen as the head of a “typical” coastal Galician matrifocal household, or *casa*. While her husband, Pepe, and older son continued to work in England, she maintained her *casa*’s investments in rental properties and developed a small *horta* (garden) behind the new house her husband had built with their emigrant earnings. All through the 10-odd years of her husband’s absence, Ana struggled to interest him in the future of their *casa* in Ezaro, but he stubbornly argued that the family would be better off in England. Eventually Ana did persuade her husband and son to return from England and to comply with her plan of starting a family business in a nearby town. But Ana’s *casa* continues to be racked with problems. Although Pepe speaks with cautious optimism about the family’s new business, he still criticizes Ana about her preference for living in Galicia. Ana and Pepe’s sons, now young men, both struggle with problems of adjustment, following the divided paths of emigrant children raised not really in one place or the other.

The view that Ana is a witch stemmed from those villagers who accused her of killing a woman after that woman denounced Ana of stealing. Ana asserted her innocence and reacted indignantly at the suggestion that she actually killed the woman. She explained that the other villagers were envious about the money she made in England. But at other times Ana would not be so confident. She commented to me that a lightning bolt would strike her down if she were really guilty of witchcraft. Ana felt conflicted about the whole issue of witchcraft and the question it raised—how much power did she have over her future?

Likewise, Ana would scoff at authoritative anthropological connotations of Galician households as “matrifocal” and “female-dominated.” She is much more likely, in intimate conversations, to describe herself as powerless, as rendered impotent by circumstances out of her control—by unexplained death, by jealous villagers, by a stubborn husband, by troubled sons.

I was originally (1985-87) drawn to do field work in coastal Galicia because of the degree of power rural women were reputed to yield there.¹ In coastal Galicia, high rates of male emigration, the importance of female agricultural labour in the subsistence economy, a preference towards daughters as primary heirs and a tendency towards uxoriality and matrifocality in household organization all seemed to be related to the reputedly unusual power of women in this region.² Over the course of my field work, however, I came to understand that many factors militated against any unambiguous understanding of women’s power, and that such power was better understood as paradoxically constituted and situationally negotiated (Kelley, 1991, 1994, 1999).

In the pages that follow, I call into question anthropological connotations of coastal Galician women’s power as “absolute” and as based in a “matrifocal” family, by exploring the ways in which five Ezaro women talk about the making of their *casas*. I begin by problematizing the key theoretical assumptions underlying these characterizations of female power. I then consider the value of looking at women’s household narratives as a particularly productive vehicle for understanding gender and power dynamics from an emic perspective. The rest of the article is devoted to the household narratives of Ezaro women themselves, from which I derive some alternative conclusions about the relationship between kinship practice and gender politics in Ezaro.

What Is More Natural than the Mother-Daughter Bond?³

As explained in the introduction to this issue, the “anomalous” power of Galician women has been highlighted in a recent review essay by Brøgger and Gilmore (1997) on the “matrifocal family” in the Iberian peninsula. Female power in Galicia, as in other parts of northwestern Iberia, is “anomalous,” according to Brøgger and Gilmore, because, while it is based in the matrifocal family, it extends beyond the boundaries of the “domestic sphere.” Brøgger and Gilmore find a partial explanation for the power of Galician women in what they characterize as the dominance of the mother-daughter dyad in Galician families, a dyad whose strength is seen as

rooted in its “endurable ties of emotion” (1997: 25).⁴ Stevan Harrell (1997), likewise, explains the uxorial residence that he sees as characteristic of coastal Galicia with reference to mother-daughter ties. Harrell argues that with high rates of male absence due to emigration, it “makes sense” for women to form the “domestic core.”

Since a domestic core of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, where it exists, inevitably generates friction, and since the house, inhabited by the women, is not intimately tied to the sources of income, brought in mostly (though not entirely) by men, it makes sense to form a female core of mothers and daughters, and this is just what is done. (Harrell, 1997: 433)

These two explanations of coastal Galician “matrifocality” or “uxoriality” share two linked flaws: they are both based on an assumption of a “naturally” harmonious mother-daughter relationship and the concept of a “domestic sphere” (or core). In recent years, feminist anthropologists⁵ have pointed out how anthropological understandings of “kinship,” “the family” and “the domestic sphere” have proven especially resistant to the kinds of epistemological critiques that anthropologists have so fruitfully applied to other areas of ethnographic inquiry. This resistance appears to be related to a persistent tendency to associate women with “nurturance,” which, despite the widespread acknowledgment of “gender” as a cultural rather than biological construct, is frequently still presumed to be both a universal human need and a function that is “naturally” performed by women.⁶ Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako trace such persistence to the origins of “our” concept of the family as “an ideological construct associated with the modern state” (1982: 25) which has made particularly impenetrable the understanding of the idea of “nurturance” as a product of capitalist society, as a conceptually necessary “symbolic opposition to work and business—in other words, to the market relations of capitalism” (1982: 34).

Likewise the opposition between “the domestic sphere” and “the public sphere” is found to be an artifact of capitalist society. Especially to be noted is the linking between the “natural” and the “domestic sphere.”

The domestic as a category is then defined in relation to a set of other concepts which mutually reinforce each other as natural, universal and not amenable to social analysis. These unspoken associations are important in that they continually reproduce the domestic as a separate, readily-identifiable domain. (Harris, 1984: 63)

My argument is that Galician mother and daughter relationships must be broken free from the constraints of the

“domestic sphere,” that the character and content of these relationships is not limited to the “natural” but given the whole range of human expression possible.

Evidence of another set of cultural assumptions, here about gender and emotion, may be seen in Brøgger and Gilmore’s formulation of the “endurable ties of emotion” between mother and daughter, and Harrell’s assertion of the “inevitable friction” of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Brøgger and Gilmore, for instance, contrast the “emotive” demonstration of power among Nazaré (northwestern Portuguese) women with the “authoritative” display of power among Andalusian men.

Judging from the observations in Nazaré, female authority is, like that of the male Andalusian, expressed through a domineering manner and a loud voice, but these do not constitute the authority of, for example, commanding officers issuing orders. The women of Nazaré rather express their will through a show of powerful emotions—emotions that are not permitted public expression in Fuenmayor [Andalusia] because of the honor-shame complex. (1997: 27)

Lutz (1988, 1990) has pointed out the implications of emotion language for gender politics, noting our cultural tendency to associate women with emotion, both in the negative sense of the opposite of “male” rationality (e.g., the assumption of the destructive potential of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law friction) and in the positive sense of the antidote to estrangement (e.g., in the assumption that “endurable ties of emotion” between mother and daughter serve as the cornerstone for the household). In the above quote, women’s emotions are characterized as powerful, but the source of this power is understood as rooted firmly in ties between women in the domestic sphere. The understanding of emotion as the opposite of estrangement is clearly linked with the positing of nurturance as the necessary opposite of the cold-hearted rationality of the market. Both understandings pivot on an assumption of a conceptual distinction between “domestic” (warm and nurturing, albeit potentially conflictive) and “public” (cold and instrumental, although inevitably most important to our survival) spheres.

Household Narratives

Arguments that invoke a clear division between “domestic” and “public” spheres, a “naturally” harmonious mother-daughter relationship and “endurable ties of [female] emotion” ironically “naturalize” (Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995) female power in a way analogous to that of authoritative scripts of “natural” male dominance. These kinds

of arguments ultimately may tell us more about our own cultural scripts of power than they do about coastal Galician perceptions of engendered power. Such formulations, by fetishizing female power, obscure an awareness of the agency of individual women. To understand emic perceptions and to see women as individual actors, we must step outside of our own cultural assumptions and attempt to understand how Galician women themselves understand and experience power.

First of all, some clarification will be needed about the concept of power. Brøgger and Gilmore, for example, conceive of power in that men in the public sphere or women in the domestic sphere (except the “anomalous” Galician case) “hold” it. Writing from a Foucauldian perspective, Bordo argues that power is not in fact “held” by anyone, “rather, people and groups are positioned differentially within it” (1997: 347). But cultural scripts “naturalize” power, often in ambiguous ways, so that we think, for instance, men and women, “hold” power.

To see the process of naturalization of power from an emic perspective, Yanagisako and Delaney suggest that anthropologists attend to narratives of origin that “tell people what kind of world it is, what it consists of, and where they stand in it; [that] make it seem natural to them” (1995: 1). I think that in Ezaro, household narratives—stories about how *casas* are built up and divided and then built up again over the generations—play much the same role for families as origin stories do for larger social groupings, “as *representations* of origins. Stories of origin are told to every generation and thus affect how people imagine themselves to be” (ibid.: 2). As the *casa* remains an integral unit of identity in Ezaro, attention to household narratives should bring to light central power dynamics and dilemmas experienced by individuals in the community. In Ezaro, I have found, household narratives naturalize relationships of power in complex and dynamic ways that call into question assumptions about the absoluteness and the “domesticity” of female power, as well as about the foundation of such power in a key mother-daughter kinship dyad.

In this paper, I explore the household narratives of four Ezaro women in addition to Ana, whose experiences in “making” her *casa* have already been introduced. Every woman in Ezaro is faced with this process of making her *casa*, whether she begins with a household inherited from her parents, marries into an established household or begins a new household with her husband. The four narratives that follow capture the experiences of women with uxorilocal, virilocal and neolocal residence, as well as the trajectories of women from two different generations and at various positions in the life

cycle. The narratives suggest that while the independent inheritance of productive resources gives Ezaro women a good deal of potential control over their destinies, the uncertainties of inheritance practice in Ezaro, experienced in the context of oftentimes contradictory discourses of power, mean that women must negotiate power situationally and that female claims to precedence are subject to varying evaluations. The narratives of Ezaro women “speak against”⁷ authoritative connotations of Galician female power in three main ways.

First, while daughters are often chosen as principal heirs, i.e., *milloradas*, sons, at least in the recent past, have been just as likely to have been selected as *millorados*.⁸ The local concern in making inheritance decisions has much less to do with the gender of the principal heir than with negotiating the moral expectations that parents select an heir who will best ensure the future success of the *casa*, while at the same time treating all children as equally as possible, an equation that is nigh impossible to achieve with even a semblance of balance. While both Spanish law and local custom set certain boundaries around the inheritance process,⁹ there is a great deal of variation from *casa* to *casa* as to exactly what kind of balance is struck. Hence, rather than a simple relationship between female inheritance and female power, uncertainty and moral ambiguity are key characteristics of household narratives in Ezaro.

Second, the most relevant emic distinction in questions of precedence is not one between domestic and public spheres, but rather one between alternate gendered understandings of the *casa*, each perceived as equally “natural.” On the one hand, the *casa* is seen as defined by “female” agricultural work; on the other, it is understood as pivoting on “male” cash provided by emigrant or other wage labour.¹⁰ This tension between alternative understandings of the *casa* has been exacerbated in recent years as the importance of agriculture in the local economy has been declining. Today Ezaro households are more likely to invest in small businesses, urban rental properties and the renovation or construction of houses, instead of in the purchase of more agricultural land.

Ezaro household narratives thus draw on scripts for defining the *casa* in female terms, but also alternative scripts in which male contributions are perceived as more powerful. From an emic perspective, neither is the “domestic” defined in simply female terms, nor is a domestic-public split perceived as uniquely pertinent to power relationships. Instead, alternative understandings of “female” agricultural work and “male” emigrant or wage labour, further complicated by ongoing changes in

the nature of emigration, define the contours of household power conflicts in Ezaro.

Third, while people in Ezaro frequently themselves cite the “naturalness” of the mother-daughter relationship as an explanation for female inheritance, just as often household narratives are peppered with stories of mother-daughter conflicts of legendary proportions. The uncertainty of the inheritance process as well as of the moral expectations guiding this process, coupled with conflicted understandings of the *casa*, create a context for much potential conflict among household members. I think that such conflict—and the burden of resolving it—is particularly likely to fall upon the shoulders of women¹¹ who are also paradoxically seen as “standing for” the idealized unity of the *casa*. Despite alternate engendered notions of the *casa*, there persists a strong expectation among villagers that however the household is defined, women are supposed to hold it together.¹² Thus, it is in women’s narratives about the “making” and “dividing” of their *casas* that tensions in household identity and power differentials are particularly evident.

Ana’s plea—“If I really were a witch”—captures the ambiguous sense of empowerment expressed in the narratives of other Ezaro women as well. “If I really were empowered . . .” their stories seem to say. Building upon my brief introduction of Ana’s household-building dilemmas, I explore the narratives of four other Ezaro women: Carmen, Ana’s aunt, who inherited her parents’ *casa*; Preciosa, another of Ana’s aunts, who married into her husband’s *casa*; Engracia, Preciosa’s daughter-in-law (a woman of Ana’s generation); and Francisca, a woman of Carmen and Preciosa’s generation, who developed a new *casa* with her husband with a house and property given to her by her father. These women’s narratives speak to the complexities of empowerment in Ezaro and to the particular conflicts women may experience as they, in their roles as female household heads, live out tensions in household identity.

Carmen’s Casa

Carmen, one of Ana’s maternal aunts, is the second youngest in a family of six siblings. As a young adult, her inheritance still undecided, Carmen emigrated to South America, working first in Argentina and then, after her marriage to a young man from a *casa forte* (well-off household) in Ezaro, joining her husband in Uruguay. Several years after her marriage and the birth of her only child, Carmen’s parents wrote to her and requested that she come home to care for them and to be the *millorada*, the principal heir, of their *casa*. Against her husband’s protests—he was content with his life

and secure employment in Uruguay—the family returned to Ezaro.

Carmen is clearly proud of having been chosen as the *millorada*, but the stories she told me about her *casa* also reveal considerable conflict. Carmen says with bitterness that her parents chose her as the *millorada* only because they had perceived her, with her presumed emigrant savings and good marriage, to be the best off of all their children. When her father died, Carmen relates, and the inheritance process began, conflict erupted among the siblings. As Carmen's parents had made the house together (*fixeron a casa xuntos*), half of the house still belonged to his wife. The other half was to be divided among his children, with the larger share going to Carmen. The negotiations that ensued between Carmen and her siblings as to how much she was to pay them for their shares,¹³ burst into an ugly conflict that persists until this day, some 20 years later.

To restore "peace" among her offspring, Carmen's mother told her that if she would pay her siblings what they asked, then she would give her her half of the house as a "donation."¹⁴ This decision, according to Carmen, while solving the inheritance stand-off, both furthered suspicions among her siblings that she was getting more than her rightful share as the *millorada* and soured her mother's impressions, already skeptical, that her daughter and her husband were not the wealthy Americans she thought. In time, Carmen's mother ceased speaking to Carmen and her husband and daughter, even though the four of them continued living in the same house until her death some five years later. Carmen's conflicts with her siblings continued after the death of the mother, and culminated in a violent confrontation in which one of her brothers struck her in the head with a hoe. When Carmen filed a suit against her brother, her other siblings ceased speaking to her in outrage at her breach of family unity.

Chosen by her parents as the *millorada*, Carmen has faced an adult life full of conflict with her siblings and shadowed by bitter memories of her mother. While Carmen clearly played the dominant hand in her own family's household-building process, one certain result of her dominance is an ongoing contentious relationship with her husband that has left her little peace. The two argue constantly over how best to spend their time and money: Carmen arguing for working in the *casa's* fields, her husband, for renovating the house. Likewise, in the mid-1980s, Carmen found little to be satisfied with in her relationship with her daughter who, although in her mid-20s, was still unmarried and although university educated, neither had a paying job nor was willing to de-

vote herself to working with her mother in the *casa's* fields. Carmen perceived herself as fundamentally disempowered by her mother's betrayal, her brother's violence, the jealousy of her other siblings, her husband's lack of co-operation with her plans for household success and her daughter's lack of commitment to agriculture, marriage and motherhood.

Preciosa's Casa

While Carmen's unyielding commitment to the promotion of her parents' *casa* has provoked bitter rifts in her relationships with her siblings, husband and daughter, her sister, Preciosa, gave up an opportunity to start her own *casa* in order to struggle her way to the head of her mother-in-law's *casa*. Preciosa, one of Carmen's older sisters, married into her husband's house. To call this a simple case of virilocal residence would be to miss the fact that Preciosa has been actively negotiating the composition of her *casa* since the day she married. Preciosa and her husband Teodoro lived with Teodoro's mother, but they also built a house together on a plot of land on the river that Preciosa had inherited from her parents. While they built this house to be a *casita de mar*—so that if they had a son who was a fisherman, he would have a place to store his equipment—it could also have served as a *casa* for Preciosa and Teodoro. In fact, Preciosa would have preferred to have lived in the river house, but she conceded to her husband's wishes and stayed in her mother-in-law's *casa*.

Preciosa's mother-in-law eventually died and Preciosa and Teodoro's two children, Manola and Tomás, grew up. When Teodoro fell ill in his early 40s, he selected Tomás as the *millorado* but only with the provision that Tomás would care for his mother. Consequently, when Tomás married after his father's death, he brought his wife, Engracia, to live with him in his mother's house. Tomás and Engracia lived in Ezaro for seven years. But like Preciosa before her, Engracia was not satisfied with her relationship with her mother-in-law. Unlike Preciosa, Engracia opted not to stay. She and Tomás and their son moved back to her natal mountain village where they built a house on a plot of land that her father had given her.

As Preciosa's daughter is married into her husband's *casa* in a nearby coastal village, Preciosa today lives alone in her husband's family house. It is Preciosa with whom her mother-in-law's *casa* is now identified in the village, a fact that has been a bitter pill to swallow for Teodoro's siblings. Preciosa has been embroiled in extended disputes with her brothers- and sisters-in-law over the ownership of plots of land that were inherited by

her son Tomás from his father. She has had to go to court to demonstrate the rightful ownership of some plots. Preciosa claims that her husband's siblings continue to torment her, stealing and destroying her crops. Preciosa wants Tomás and Engracia to come back to live with her, reasoning that if they did so, they could save even more money and buy even more apartments in Santiago. She does not understand why they want to live in their own house in another village.

Engracia's Casa

Engracia herself has been having little luck in establishing the household that she desires. Her goal has been to develop a *casa* with family lands in her natal village. She perceives her husband's earnings from his job on a cargo ship as facilitating this goal. Engracia's decision to leave her mother-in-law's house in Ezaro was motivated by the opportunities she perceived for inheriting in her own village where she had both her parents and a childless uncle, who had intimated to Engracia that she was his choice of heir. Things have not, however, worked out as Engracia planned. Her uncle died, but his wife who, according to Engracia, is very insincere, persuaded him to leave the *millora* to one of her nephews. Engracia was thus left with much less than she had expected from the inheritance. Then she learned that she is not to receive as much as she had hoped from her own parents either. Tomás tells her jokingly that first she has gotten a kick from one side—because things did not work out in Ezaro with his family—and now she is getting a kick from the other side—from her own family. Engracia retorts that she only hopes that she does not get a kick from the middle—from him.

Francisca's Casa

Francisca is a widow in her late 60s. Her father, who had emigrated to the United States, was able to give each of his four daughters a house when she married. Francisca was given an old house near the beach with the idea that she and her husband would fix it up as they were able. Francisca and her husband decided to first work at building a new house on an adjoining piece of property, also given to Francisca by her father, and then renovate the older house later. Unfortunately, Francisca's husband died an untimely death—at the age of 46, after 23 years of marriage—from silicosis.¹⁵ Only the lower floor of the new house had been finished when he died. Francisca's oldest daughter (who was 19 when her father died) emigrated to Switzerland and sent the money she earned back home to her mother. With this money and the help of two younger daughters, Francisca was able to

complete the new house, and that is where she lives today.

Francisca is one of the kindest and most mild-mannered women that I know in Ezaro. When she began to describe the inheritance of her father's property, I was thus surprised by the causticity of her statements. Though her father had given a house to each of his daughters, the money that he had earned while in the United States had not been mentioned in the will (in order to avoid taxes) and it was not clear to whom this money was to go.

Francisca expressed extreme repugnance at the thought that her father's hard-earned money would go to her brother-in-law, the husband of her sister, Victoria, who was chosen as the *millorada*. With added bitterness, Francisca described to me graphically how she, her sisters and her mother had suffered while her father was abroad. He had left when she was four years old and did not return until after she was married. She worked hard throughout her childhood, helping her mother to make ends meet.

Francisca felt so strongly about this injustice that she refused to sign the document signaling agreement among all of the heirs with respect to the division of the estate. She says that her other siblings look at her as a *mala* (the bad one) for refusing to be co-operative and sign, but she does not see herself as bad. By refusing to sign, Francisca asserts, she is protecting the interests of her family, and particularly those of her mother, who she feels is particularly prejudiced by the agreement, against the greed of her brother-in-law. Francisca avows, "*Entre as de casa veñen os de fora*" (those from outside come to divide those of the household).

According to Francisca, Victoria is not so much to blame in this affair; she simply did what her husband told her to do. Francisca explained to me, only half ironically, that we, as women, do what our husbands tell us to do because from our perspective, the husband is God. Her sister's husband "*quería ser galo*" (he wanted to be the rooster, the cock of the roost); he wanted to be a millionaire with the money that her father had earned in America. That money, Francisca exclaimed angrily, could have united the family. Instead, her brother-in-law's selfishness drove the family apart.

Contours of Power

The narratives of Carmen, Preciosa, Engracia, Francisca and Ana all speak to the complexities of female power in the process of household-building in Ezaro. These narratives are also revealing about what is perceived as "natural" in this process, and how such "naturalness" may be

alternatively empowering and disempowering. These five women think about and strategize actions with reference to their *casas* at the intersections of overlapping discourses of power (Rosaldo, 1989; Yanagisako and Delaney, 1995: 18).

These narratives resonate, first, with the uncertainties of inheritance practice in Ezaro and the particular ways in which such uncertainties weigh upon women. Carmen made the decision to emigrate to South America, her inheritance uncertain. Preciosa balanced her individual inheritance of river property with her role as daughter-in-law in her husband's *casa*. Engracia juggled several different strategies with respect to her future *casa* in both her husband's and her own natal villages. And the money unmentioned in the will provoked a bitter dispute in Francisca's family. While legal restrictions on inheritance are sufficiently general to allow for a good deal of conflict at the local level, women, like Carmen and Preciosa, do not hesitate to use the judicial system if they feel it can further empower them in the making—and defending—of their *casas*.

The female burden of holding *casas* together in Ezaro is exacerbated by male absence, whether through death or emigration, at the time of crucial household decisions. It was Carmen's mother who tried—and failed—to keep her children content and her *casa* strong. It is Carmen who continues to bear the brunt of her mother's failure to this day. It is Preciosa who has been left fending off angry in-laws, on the one side, and trying to appease a hard-to-please (in her mind) daughter-in-law, on the other. The absence of Francisca's father during her childhood still reverberates powerfully in her adult life and the untimely death of her husband left the responsibility for finishing their *casa* entirely on her shoulders. Engracia's and Ana's husbands, both while working abroad and at home, have left decisions regarding their *casas* up to their wives, much to the chagrin of these women. Engracia perceives a "kick from the middle" as imminent, and Ana expresses constant frustration at her husband's lack of involvement in important decisions regarding their *casa*.

The experiences of all five of these women, taken as a whole, remind us that neither uxorilocality nor matrilocality can be assumed to be "typical" of coastal Galician households, and that even in uxorilocal households, female power is always contested rather than absolute.

Secondly, these narratives ring with conflict among female household members. While Preciosa and Engracia's narratives may illustrate an "expected" tension between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and Francisca's story may highlight villagers' suspicions about in-

marrying outsiders, Carmen's relationships with both her mother and her daughter suggest that such conflict is not unique to "in-laws." As the making and dividing of households is so intimately implicated in the identity of individual women, the potential for conflict among female household members is particularly high. There is no reason to assume that a mother-daughter dyad is more inherently stable than a relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, and in the context of Ezaro, where the *casa* is so integral to individual identity and reputation, and the stress on female adults so high to insure (or at least maintain the semblance) of household unity, many good reasons for assuming potential mother-daughter conflict. Paying closer attention to emic fault lines (frequently paradoxical), rather than making essentialist assumptions about kinship relations, ultimately gives us a more complete understanding of the inheritance process.

But power struggles also exist among male and female household members, and particularly between "male" and "female" understandings of the household. Thus while Carmen may have inherited her *casa*, her claims to precedence are constantly challenged by her husband's invocation of his wage-earning power. Likewise, Ana built up and maintained her *casa* during her husband's absence in England, but could never truly score a moral victory over his argument that their lives as emigrants had been better than life in Ezaro. Arguments about "domestic" vs. "public" power are thus meaningless in the emic context. Debates drawing on alternative discourses of power pay no heed to etic divisions of domestic and public but are carried out in and across the *cocinas* (kitchens), *leiras* (fields) and *corredoiras* (paths) of Ezaro. These debates, wherever they occur, deeply imbue the fabric of women's household narratives.

Ana's ongoing debate with her husband over the value of their *casa* in Ezaro, points to how the long-standing dislocation between two alternative scripts of household precedence (long-standing due to the long involvement of Ezaro men—and women—in emigration and other sources of wage labour) has been intensified in recent years by the movement away from agriculture in household economies. A shift is occurring in some households in which women "tend" the household's rental properties or small business in addition to, or instead of, the household's fields. While the long practice of emigration in this community has rendered disruption and discontinuity familiar processes, recent transformations in the nature of emigration—in which husbands and wives more frequently emigrate together, in which

the ideal of return to Galicia is increasingly challenged by both economic circumstances and children born and raised abroad, and in which new values of consumption call into question subsistence ideals—have further complicated long-standing debates about gendered contributions to household identity.

That Ana was accused of being a witch by some of her fellow villagers seems to have had a lot to do with her rejection, as a returned emigrant, of a return to a role as a full-time agriculturalist. A powerful woman who challenged fellow villagers' conventional understandings of female power, she was rendered a witch. Yet, from her husband's perspective, Ana tirelessly defends what he perceives as an outmoded understanding of the *casa*. As the terrain on which villagers debate gendered notions of power continues to shift, more and more women like Ana will be faced with negotiating their identities—and their power relations—in continually new discursive spaces.¹⁶

If Ana “really were a witch” today, she would erase England from her husband's mind and render her two sons healthy and productive members of the *casa*. She would find wives for them who would be good companions to her in her old age and she would fill the house that she and her husband have already built for their sons (and which now stands gloomily empty) with grandchildren. But Ana is not a witch, nor does she hold “absolute power” in her *casa*. Ana is in many ways a “typical” Ezaro woman, one with many dashed dreams and an everyday life filled with conflict with family members who do not share her vision of her *casa*. Listening to the ways in which Galician women like Ana, Carmen, Preciosa, Engracia and Francisca talk about their power, allows us a more complete understanding of the complexities of their experiences of both empowerment and disempowerment.

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Notes

- 1 My 1985-87 field work was supported by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, a Fulbright-Hays/Spanish Government Grant, the National Science Foundation and the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies. I have made return visits to Galicia in 1988, 1990, 1996 and 1997.
- 2 This characterization of coastal Galicia was first developed

by Lisón Tolosana (1979). Similar patterns have also been noted as characteristic of at least some zones of northwestern Portugal (Brettell, 1985, 1986, Cole, 1991, O'Neill, 1987, 1995). See, however, Parkhurst (in this volume) for a critique of homogeneous characterizations of northern Portuguese gender politics.

- 3 I paraphrase from Yanagisako and Delaney's subtitle “What Is More Natural than Sex?” (1995: 5).
- 4 They also, however, characterize this dyad as a “hidden relationship” (Brøgger and Gilmore, 1997: 26).
- 5 See, in particular, Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako (1982), Ginsburg and Rapp (1995), Yanagisako and Collier (1987) and Yanagisako and Delaney (1995). This line of analysis builds upon David Schneider's insights into the cultural assumptions underlying the anthropological study of kinship (e.g., Schneider, 1968, 1984).
- 6 This argument is elaborated by Collier, Rosaldo and Yanagisako (1982) and Harris (1984).
- 7 I paraphrase here Abu-Lughod's concept of “writing against culture” (1991, 1993).
- 8 In Ezaro in 1987, 41% of the *casas* had been inherited in *milloras*, i.e., by principal heirs. Of these, 53% of the *milloras* had been granted to male heirs and 47% to female heirs. In recent years, however, there has been a trend toward favouring daughters with the *millora*. With respect to the transmission of property to the next generation, in 62% of the cases in which the selection of the *millorado* appeared clear in 1987, a female had been designated as heir; in 38%, a male had been selected.
- 9 Two types of *millora* are practiced in Ezaro, a *millora vella*, in which a relatively smaller portion (usually one third of the estate) is given to the *millorado*, and a *millora nova*, in which almost all of the estate goes to the *millorado*. This distinction roughly corresponds to a historical difference in the quantity of the *mejora* (the Castilian term for *millora* that is used in all legal documents) before and after the institution of the Spanish Civil Code in 1880.
- 10 Compare Roseman's characterization of alternative emphases of hierarchy and egalitarianism within households in the rural Galician community of Zas (in this volume).
- 11 See de la Gala's Gonzalez's characterization (in this volume) of the burdens shouldered by rural Galician women in Mazaricos and Viana do Bolo.
- 12 See Micaela di Leonardo (1987) for a discussion of the “kin work” done by women as broadly characteristic of American kinship.
- 13 The custom in cases like this in Ezaro has been for the other siblings to set the price that the *millorado* must pay them for their shares in the house. This is deemed to be fair because it is the *millorado* who has been favoured with the ownership of the family house and the others deserve to be compensated for their loss. Fairness is expected in this process, as all siblings are ideally supposed to desire the unity of their natal *casa* and thus to support the *millorado*. The fact that all of the other siblings must agree upon one price together is also said to help insure that the price will not be outrageous. In practice, this custom often results in conflict.
- 14 Today it is more usual for the house to be given outright as a donation to the *millorado*. Other siblings are compensated with an extra plot of land or a cash payment. It was ex-

plained to me that parents choose the donation as a way to avoid fighting among their children.

- 15 People in Ezaro reported an unusually high rate of death from silicosis in their community. Many villagers contracted silicosis while working on a dam project in the parish in the 1940s.
- 16 See Collier (1997) for an ethnographic analysis of shifting gender politics in an Andalusian community.

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