Working Separately but Eating Together: Personhood, Property, and Power in Conjugal Relations
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Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of the American Anthropological Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/645860
Accessed: 12/12/2009 18:34

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working separately but eating together: personhood, property, and power in conjugal relations

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Spurred initially by a recognition that “the household” could not serve as a unit of analysis in many of the ethnographic contexts in which they worked, Africanists have given considerable analytical attention to gendered divisions of labor and reward mediated through the conjugal relationship. These issues have been less thoroughly explored in Southeast Asia, where a cultural emphasis on harmony and complementarity has sometimes deflected attention from the contractual and potentially unequal basis of conjugal exchange.

In this article I draw on the theoretical insights of feminist anthropologists working in Africa and apply the conceptual repertoire they have developed to the analysis of personhood, property, and conjugal relations in Southeast Asia. While I am aware of the risks entailed in lifting analytical constructs from one context and deploying them in another, there are also, as Edward Said points out, many insights to be gained when theory “travels” (1983:242). In this case, as I hope to demonstrate, the gains are twofold: a fresh perspective on gender issues in Southeast Asia which highlights a regional ethnographic area of inquiry hitherto underexplored in the literature, and some enrichment of the body of theory itself, as the comparison helps to clarify the origins of theory within the time and place from which it emerged and to which it responds, and opens it up toward other realities (Said 1983:242).

Cultural repertoires always carry within them a range of possible understandings with diverse implications for practice, although the outcomes are not simply a matter of choice. A particular strength of the Africanist literature to which I allude in this article is the sustained attention to questions of agency, and the attempt to situate the renegotiation of cultural practices in the context of changing material conditions and shifting fields of power. Constructs of personhood and the capacity of differently located persons to control property are treated not as constants, but instead as domains of struggle. The effort to comprehend the nature and limits of “struggles over meaning” (Berry 1988b), and the directions of change that both contribute to and emerge from these struggles, lie at the heart of feminist research on questions of personhood and property in Africa. It is the exploration of the capacity of the theories and concepts developed in that context to produce fresh insights in another, rather than a comparison of abstract models of African and Southeast Asian kinship, that drives my analytical agenda here.

In this article I apply the conceptual repertoire developed by feminist scholars in Africa to examine concepts of personhood, property, and the conjugal contract in Southeast Asia. I suggest that, as theory travels, it offers fresh insight in the new context in which it is deployed and is itself enriched. Studies of urban Singapore and upland Sulawesi illustrate the ways in which cultural ideas are reworked as women and men reposition themselves and attempt to secure their economic futures in the context of changing material conditions and shifting fields of power. [gender, property, personhood, work, power, theory, Southeast Asia]
The analytical framework within which my comparative exercise takes shape is one that emphasizes the role of agency in deriving unique (and partial) resolutions to the structural dilemmas associated with a particular time and place. I begin with a review of the conceptual repertoire developed by Africanists. This is followed by an overview of concepts of personhood, property, and conjugal relations drawn from the literature on Southeast Asia. I then examine these issues in detail in urban Singapore and upland Sulawesi, to explore the cultural understandings, practices, and strategies that emerge at two distinct sites. My data for Singapore derive from household interviews and participant-observation undertaken in the context of my doctoral research from 1982–84. For Sulawesi, I draw on field research totalling eight months and conducted between 1990–96 in several mountain hamlets. I end my article by revisiting the Africanist formulations and drawing some conclusions focused around the issue of power.

The conceptual framework in my analysis adds an important dimension to my search for the elusive “difference that makes a difference” (Atkinson 1990:90). This “difference” accounts for men’s greater power and prestige in the region despite the relatively high status and nominal equality of women in many contexts. It is not a framework that begins or ends with the victimization of women by men, by the state, or by capitalist market pressures. Nor does it highlight moments of dramatic resistance. Rather, it addresses the issue of power through a focus on gendered rhythms of work and exchange. It brings into view the everyday discourse and practice through which women and men reshape the social world, engaging and redirecting state agendas while reworking the cultural meanings of things and relationships and reconfiguring the more intimate domains of conjugal commitment and generosity.

personhood, property, and the conjugal contract: feminist theorizing about Africa

personhood and property  Ann Whitehead’s important contribution to feminist theorizing about personhood and property in rural Africa is framed as an intervention in classic social theory. She observes that classic discussions of the relationship between personhood and property were founded on evolutionary presumptions and relied on a dichotomous contrast between types of society. Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism hinges on the distinction between the Western (capitalist or bourgeois) concept of property which embodies “the legal separation of subject and object, and . . . the legal separation of subject from subject in his or her capacity to have control over the disposal of a thing which has been designated his or her property,” and its “historical opposite,” in which these characteristics are reversed (Whitehead 1984:180). A similar dichotomy underlies Mauss’s distinction between archaic (gift) societies and modern (commodity) societies in which people “transact freely with one another” and objects are “alienated commodities, separate from the giver and the recipient” (Carrier 1992:200; Gregory 1982:10–24).

Critics have argued that the contrast posed by these models is overdrawn. It obscures “matter out of place” (Carrier 1992:204): morally burdened relationships articulated through giftlike transactions in market-dominated societies, and commodity-like transactions that occur in times or places in which, according to the model, they are not expected (see also Appadurai 1986a; Parry 1986; Parry and Bloch 1989). Reformulated, however, and shorn of their evolutionary associations, these classic discussions indicate a significant area for empirical inquiry. This is the issue to which Whitehead (1984) draws our attention in her essay on women and property:

I find this suggestion, that bound up with the concepts of property are concepts of the person, and that these concepts of the person in turn can be characterised by their degree of individuation within social relations, an extraordinarily powerful one to begin thinking more generally about women (and men) and property. [1984:180]

Raising the possibility that degrees of individuation are variable by gender, she argues further:
the issue raised is the extent to which forms of conjugal, familial and kinship relations allow [a woman] an independent existence so that she can assert rights as an individual against individuals. In many societies a woman’s capacity to act in this way may be severely curtailed compared to a man’s. [1984:189]

The ethnographic work of Whitehead and other feminist scholars who have examined gender issues in African contexts highlights the difference between men and women in their capacity to assert themselves as persons under changing cultural, economic, and political conditions. This body of work makes a distinction between women’s nominal right to own property (which exists to some degree in most African societies) and their capacity to operationalize these rights in practice. Among the structural limitations that women in Africa commonly encounter are dependence on husbands, sons, or male kin to provide access to patrilineal land; lack of access to labor power, including their own, when they must meet labor obligations to husband and household before engaging in their own enterprises; and lack of access to capital in those cases when they are burdened with the responsibility for household provisioning or required by a doctrine of maternal altruism to put family needs above personal accumulation or investment (Berry 1988a, 1988b; Moore 1988; Stamp 1989; Whitehead 1984:185).

Women’s capacity to own property depends also on the fields of power within which they make and pursue their claims. Whitehead observes that rural women in many African societies are less-than-equal persons in the political realm, not permitted to represent themselves and barely represented in customary courts even in “woman cases” (Whitehead 1984:188). They are therefore disadvantaged when defending their claims to property against others (husband, other wives, sharecroppers), especially when claims overlap. To work around these limitations, women in some of the agrarian contexts examined by Berry (1988a) base their investment decisions on their capacity to collect, preferring sectors in which the payoffs are quick and not dependent on maintaining long-term control over assets.

**divisions of labor and the conjugal contract** The conjugal relationship is one of several relationships in which women experience the embeddedness in kinship relations that potentially limits their individuation and personhood. It is especially important as a focus for feminist research as a site through which gendered divisions of labor and reward are negotiated. Feminist scholars working in Africa have investigated this relationship through the concept of the conjugal contract, defined as the “terms on which husbands and wives exchange goods, incomes, and services, including labor, within the household” (Whitehead 1981:93). They have emphasized the shifting nature of this contract as partners negotiate rights and responsibilities over long periods of time under changing material conditions (Berry 1988a:156). They have also pointed out the ways in which room for maneuver is constrained (but not eliminated) by official legal systems that bring the power of the state to bear on the definition of the conjugal contract and on the interpretation of “tradition” (Carney and Watts 1991).

Within Africa, it has been noted that there is much variation in the extent to which the economic terms of the conjugal contract are specified and handled overtly. In some instances the contractual aspects are quite explicit and may include remuneration for goods and services among household members (Whitehead 1985:45). In other cases expectations are left implicit, or clothed in a language of cooperation that mutes or masks the economic aspects of marital transactions. In either case, in order to assess the effective terms of the contract, it is necessary to investigate “resource flows themselves (for example, the mobilisation of women’s labor for men’s crops) and focus questions on the forms of interdependence and local understandings that enable them” (Leach 1991a:50).

A key arena of struggle within the conjugal relationship is the meaning and value to be attached to gendered labor. When women press claims for a greater degree of ownership or control, an issue that quickly arises is that of embeddedness: the extent to which women’s labor can or should be deemed an extension of their conjugal role, or the action of autonomous individuals. The picture that emerges from the literature is a tapestry of different types of work,
on different crops, in different locations, each of which is associated with greater or lesser
degrees of individualized control. Berry finds, for example, that when a woman works on her
husband's cocoa farm, she is not considered to be creating individualized property. In the case
of a dispute, she makes her claim against her husband within the general framework of conjugal
rights and responsibilities (1988a:150–151). For other crops, grown in other spaces, her rights
are more distinct.

To assess the degree to which women's labor is subsumed in their conjugal role, it is necessary
to examine more carefully the characteristics of the divisions of labor and rhythms of work in
which women and men are involved. Whitehead (1985:42) makes a distinction between two
forms of the division of labor: a sex-sequential labor process requiring inputs from each sex at
different times to produce a single product, and a sex-segregated process, in which the members
of the one or other sex perform all the operations necessary to produce a given product. Further,
she suggests that women's claims on the property that their labor creates may be weaker in a
sex-sequential process, since the basis upon which they are to be rewarded for their work is
often unclear, allowing their contribution to be submerged in the definition of their conjugal
role. As my Southeast Asian examples will show later, the implications of embedding labor in
a sequential labor process play out differently where the essential separateness of persons is
retained within the conjugal relationship—an observation that offers an opportunity to deepen
Whitehead's original insights.

Jane Guyer (1991) takes the analysis of the relationship between women's and men's labor
to a further level of specificity. She rejects the static formulae that catalog divisions of labor by
task (men clear, women plant), or by crop (women grow groundnuts, men grow cocoa). She
proposes instead a methodological focus on changing rhythms and cycles of work, observed
over long periods and assessed in relation to the range of factors—from new crops and
technologies to state programs—that impinge upon them. For the Beti, she shows that gendered
divisions of labor and reward were extrapolated and transferred quite smoothly over a period
of a decade or so when one cash crop replaced another. More serious changes, which emerged
over a longer time frame, centered on the loss of space for intercrops and the abandonment of
the long- and short-term land-use cycles within which women's and men's productive activities
previously had been entwined. For women, the loss of these spaces and elements in the
production cycle meant the "disappearance of the material embodiment of what were contin-
gent and derivative claims" (1991:269). They responded by intensifying work on their own
crops, creating the women's sphere that colonial observers mistook to be a natural (ahistorical)
feature of African agrarian systems. As Beti women's and men's agricultural and nonagricultural
activities became progressively separated both in space and in their associated rhythms and
cycles, men, who had largely lost the capacity to requisition women's labor, made new claims
on their income. Struggles within the conjugal relationship then centered on the interpretation
of the old cultural formula "he clears, he eats" in the context of new regimes of production.

Guyer's analysis suggests that women's agency and the structural conditions that impinge on it
can be discerned in gendered rhythms and cycles of work in Beti fields. There women articulate
the nature and limits of their personhood, negotiate the ambiguities of conjugal contracts, assay
the material and cultural weight of particular divisions of labor, and attempt a variety of
discursive and practical strategies for making and defending claims. The conceptual repertoire
developed by Guyer and the other feminist scholars whose work has been discussed in this
section offers a definite advance over the dichotomies encountered in some classic formula-
tions. As I will demonstrate, this repertoire has the potential to yield new insights when it travels.

personhood, property, and conjugal relations in Southeast Asia

In my discussion of Southeast Asia, I draw on only a small selection of the vast ethnographic
literature potentially relevant to my themes. One limitation that I impose at the outset of my
inquiry is an exclusive focus on the conjugal relationship rather than other relationships (such as sibling, parent, or child) in which the individuation of women and men and their differential capacity to own or control property may also be at issue. My observations focus on the area broadly known as the Malay world; I include Malaysia, Singapore, and most of Indonesia but exclude eastern Indonesia (from the Lesser Sundas) and parts of Sumatra that have a significantly different social structure (Errington 1990:39). I refer both to the lowland and urban areas in which Islam predominates, and to the interior upland populations that have been exposed to Islamic ideas to varying degrees (Tsing 1993). My analysis will indicate that, at least in relation to the topics investigated here, uplands and lowlands share elements of a common cultural repertoire. The case studies, which are drawn from the contrasting contexts of urban Singapore and upland Sulawesi, will later illustrate the ways in which cultural ideas drawn from this regional repertoire are reworked and redeployed under specific material conditions.

**personhood and property** The observation that gender relations in Southeast Asia are relatively egalitarian has become commonplace in the ethnographic literature on the region. Most often the status of women in China and India serves as the point of comparison against which the situation of women in Southeast Asia is judged (Ong 1989). Distinctive cultural features held to account for the strong position of women in the region include the bilateral kinship system, an emphasis on complementarity rather than opposition in gender relations, and hierarchy based primarily on age and rank. Even when men pay bridewealth, residence patterns tend to be matrifocal, and networks among related women often form the basis of neighborhoods. In the economic sphere it is noted that women usually control the household purse and participate in farming, trade, and other professions. They tend to inherit equally with their brothers despite the male bias of Islam and are entitled to a half share of marital property upon divorce.

Despite the advantages they enjoy over other women in different areas and their general (or legal) equality with men in many contexts, Southeast Asian women lag behind men in power and prestige. Feminist research on the region—such as that collected in volumes edited by Atkinson and Errington (1990), Karim (1995), and Ong and Peletz (1995)—has begun to investigate how relations that appear equal or undifferentiated on one level are differentiated in practice. This is a specific area of inquiry that can be enriched by a focus on gendered property relations drawing on the insights of feminist theorizing in Africa.

In Southeast Asia men's advantage does not appear to lie in concepts of personhood as such: Errington writes that "male and female are viewed as basically the same sorts of beings, that is, ones whose souls and functioning are very similar or are parallel" (1990:39). Instead, "differential male-female access to power tends to be located, in local theory, not at the level of the person's gendered characteristics or anatomy analogue, but in practices...[W]omen and men are basically the same, but because of the activities women engage in or fail to do, they tend not to become prominent and powerful" (1990:40; Atkinson 1990; Tsing 1990:124).

The research that I cited earlier is not very clear about whether women in the studied African contexts are considered to be intrinsically different from, or inferior to, men as persons. Rather, this research emphasizes, in common with feminist research in Southeast Asia, that men's greater prestige relates to the meanings attached to the particular practices in which they engage. Errington (1990:7) argues that the busyness of Southeast Asian women in economic matters and their concern with money are signs not of power (a Western reading) but of weakness. Real power is derived from the spiritual domain, and there men have the advantage. This is true not only in the Muslim lowlands, but also in the highland interiors: according to Atkinson (1990) Wana women in upland Sulawesi are not forbidden to seek or acquire spiritual power and act as shamans but, because they are tied to an annual cycle of field work, they travel only rarely into the forests and distant places where spiritual power can be found. Similarly, in Kalimantan,
Tsing (1984, 1990) observes that Meratus men’s tasks in the gender division of labor (land preparation, forest-based hunting and gathering, and travel to trade in distant markets) are conferred special prestige. Moreover, under conditions that do not support institutionalized hierarchy and formal leadership, it is the prestige and experience gained from these activities that permit men to assert themselves in political forums in which both men and women are present and many speak, but only some men are heeded.

The Southeast Asian ethnographic literature is quite explicit on the strength of culturally embedded ideas about the uniqueness of individuals. These ideas derive from, or at least relate to, the Islamic notion of nasib, the unique fate that endows each person with special capacities. Nasib defines the individual’s personality and preferences, the destined partner in love and marriage (jodoh), the moment and manner of death, and, most relevant to my discussion here, the individual’s economic fate, or rezeki. A similar concept (rajakii) is encountered in the Meratus mountains, an area marginal to (but not unaware of) Islam:

Rajaki is . . . the “luck” one can strive to increase through knowledge and ritual and one can look for as game in the forest, honey in the trees, a good deal in the market place, or a winning number in the lottery. The demands of following one’s rajaki separate individuals each trying to find their own living. At a basic level, the individual is the subject of rajaki; or, one could equally say, the discourse on rajaki creates individual subjects with separate needs and desires . . . [T]he formation and birth of a child highlights the individual nature of rajaki . . . [as] the child in the womb creates its own subjective needs, desires, and life course in an individual confrontation with God. [Tsing 1984:486]

As Tsing notes, in the Meratus context, parents and other kin have little in the way of accumulated resources to pass on to a child: it is the practice of living and finding one’s rajaki that differentiates individuals. An individual’s rajaki can be pursued in cooperation with others: with the swidden (hill rice) farming unit (usually formed around a conjugal couple), and in the larger group that seeks collective good fortune through the performance of community rituals. At the same time, “talk of rajaki explains why people, even kin, may go their separate ways” (1984:491).

Southeast Asian concepts of the uniqueness of individuals and the expectation that individuals will express personal desires and seek ways to realize their own fortunes are central to local understandings of personhood in the context of conjugal relations. As my ethnographic analysis will show, a significant dimension of gender inequality can be exposed by tracing the ways in which the spiritual uniqueness of persons plays out differently for women and men in the operational contexts of work and exchange. These are the contexts in which questions of individuation and embeddedness arise in particular and sometimes unexpected forms.

divisions of labor and the conjugal contract

The enduring separateness of persons is integral to the concept of marriage in Southeast Asia. Banks (1983), writing about rural north Malaysia, describes the conjugal bond as a contract based on the voluntary agreement (muafakat) of two adults to live and work together. Although there are certain legal and customary obligations associated with marriage, the distinct interests of the partners imply that a relationship can be built only out of a willingness to cooperate and to be generous. This idea is expressed as kesayangan, a spiritual kinship that “links the essences of individuality in persons as whole beings” (Banks 1983:48) and is “present in all close social relationships containing a voluntary moral component” (1983:128). Similarly, Jay (1969:66, 124) reports that in rural Java the ideal in marriage, as in all social relationships, is rukun, understood as the ongoing process of harmonizing distinct and separate interests.

Founded in a voluntary contract, and based on distinct but complementary interests, the marriage relationship is, at its core, an economic partnership. As Atkinson observes for the mountain Wana, “the conjugal relationship is about work” and “both spouses are expected to be hardworking contributors to their productive unit” (1990:68). The complementary interests of men and women are clearly highlighted in the customary sequential division of labor that
prevails among rice farmers both in upland swidden conditions and on the plains. Yet in urban areas such as Singapore (Li 1989); in areas with mixed economies and substantial outmigration, for example Negeri Sembilan (Stivens 1988); or among classes—both landed and landless—who do not labor directly on their own fields (Hart 1991, 1992; Stoler 1977), the exchanges between husband and wife and the nature of their economic partnership take on more complex forms.

In Southeast Asia the terms of the conjugal contract are seldom made explicit. The cultural emphasis is on the ideal of complementarity between marriage partners, and the hope that harmony and kinship sentiment will prevail over narrow self-interest. This is the idea expressed by both women and men when they emphasize that they may work and accumulate property separately from their spouse, but they nevertheless eat and enjoy good fortune together. Subject as they are to the delicacies of conjugal commitment, the terms of exchange that link distinct labor practices and the expectations of husband and wife in relation to the enjoyment of benefits and ownership of assets are embedded in everyday habits and seldom discussed directly. For this reason, I have found it useful to supplement my attempts to understand the cultural framing of conjugal exchanges in “normal” times with an examination of divorce proceedings and property disputes. These occasions offer an additional source of insight into the ways conjugal relations and individuation within marriage can be accounted for in more explicit normative terms.

Throughout the Malay region the customary principle of harta sepencarian (literally, property resulting from people working together) or harta syarikat (joint or collective property) is recognized as the legal basis for property division upon divorce. This principle has long been interpreted to mean that husband and wife are entitled to equal shares of the product of their joint labors (Maxwell 1884:125). Local understandings and legal precedents have contributed to evolving interpretations of the meaning of this “jointness.”

The distinction between sex-sequential and sex-segregated labor processes raised in the Africanist literature offers a way of making sense of the understandings at work in property settlements in Southeast Asia. Where husband and wife work on a single crop, most commonly rice, their partnership in production is recognized in the equal division of the property acquired as a result of their joint efforts. For example, if they produce bountiful harvests and are therefore able to purchase additional land, the land is divided equally upon divorce. But where husband and wife labor separately in a sex-segregated process, the property that each produces is not considered to be jointly owned. In rural north Malaysia, according to Banks, the determination of rights to property acquired during a marriage involves a precise breakdown and calculation of the capital and labor that each partner has contributed to the acquisition of each specific material asset, such as a house or an addition to a house (1976:581). In a legal case in Perak in the 1900s, the court found that the wife had no claim at all on her husband’s money earnings while she was at home (Ahmad 1978:271). Likewise, in the Gayo highlands of Indonesia the courts have found that a woman has no claim to the commercial tree plantations of her husband unless she has labored directly on the crop (Bowen 1988).11

The assumption that underlies these property settlements is the enduring separateness of individuals and their labor within marriage. What prevails is, in effect, a labor theory of property according to which individuals have clear entitlement only to property for which they have labored directly.12 Such a view places an obvious tension at the heart of the conjugal contract, which is built upon the necessity and, indeed, the willingness of individuals to enter into relationships of cooperation and exchange. It suggests that men and women stand to gain or lose differentially from specific forms of the division of labor as these are enacted through varying cycles and rhythms of work. Implicit in daily practices are struggles over the meaning and value of the different labor processes in which women and men engage and the significance of the exchanges between them.13
Since there are multiple possibilities present within any cultural repertoire, it is important to explore the specific conditions within which ideas drawn from this repertoire become shaped and structured and to examine the day-to-day processes and negotiations through which cultural production, reproduction, and reinvention are accomplished. The strategies that men and women pursue to preserve and enhance their autonomy within marriage and to secure partnerships that meet their aspirations are explored in the two case studies that follow. In the first case, urban Singapore, I focus on transactions that relate to money earned by men and trace out the implications for gendered asset formation. In the second, rural Sulawesi, I focus on deployments of labor in the direct creation of property in the form of land and trees. In both cases, women must negotiate the meanings of things, practices, and relationships within a political-economic context that, in various and sometimes subtle ways, favors men and renders men’s claims more powerful.

**Gifts and Personhood in a Commodified Context: Malay Households in Singapore**

For the Malay component (about 15%) of Singapore’s population, property takes the form of goods and cash acquired primarily through the urban wage economy. For Malay women who work without pay in the home, asset formation depends on the claims they can make on money earned by their husbands. To acquire property and develop personal security and autonomy, they must address the individualizing potential of the wage form and negotiate the meaning of the goods and services exchanged within the domestic unit. Their strategies and practices reveal significant dimensions of the conjugal contract as a contested field.

Living in a world of goods, Singaporeans are acutely aware that every item purchased or service rendered has a market price and is actually or potentially a commodity. Women know the market price of the domestic services they perform without pay in the home, and the opportunity cost of their time in terms of wages foregone. Labor is short and large banners on factory walls close to residential areas remind young women daily of the money they could earn if they walked in through the gate. For older women, domestic services (cleaning houses, canteen cooking, running a food stall) are always saleable.

While men and women are equally aware of the commoditized value of their labor, it is performed in separate spheres and differently rewarded. Men typically receive the reward for their labor as wages, an obvious and direct outcome of their individual effort. Women working in the home can claim their “pay” only indirectly, as a share of their husband’s income. In this situation, a potential contradiction exists between women’s sense of the value of their labor and the nonrecognition of its commodity aspect when this labor is performed in the home.

In describing exchanges between husband and wife, Singapore Malays give major emphasis to the notion of the gift (Li 1989:6–11, 18–33). This is a usage that might be explained by regarding the household as a residual sphere of natural economy uncontaminated by the market. It could also be understood as a cultural construction that has arisen in the context of, and in response to, the market. As Parry (1986:456) points out, it is market economic relations that engender an emphasis on the pure gift as their conceptual counterpart. More specifically, as Bourdieu observes, the moral burden carried by gifts makes them powerful vehicles for “getting and keeping a lasting hold over someone” (1977:191). It should therefore not surprise us that the notion of the gift becomes especially prominent in a context where the individualizing potential of the urban wage economy makes it possible for people to go their own way. It is through the exchange of gifts, or exchanges phrased as gifts, that individuals seek to build and sustain long-term relationships. Moreover, gifts enable people to establish such connections while simultaneously asserting and enhancing their own autonomy and personhood.

Malay women who forego the direct autonomy that stems from earning wages seek to assert their identity as autonomous persons by describing the domestic labor services performed.
without pay for their families as gifts. They stress the voluntary nature of their commitment to nurture husband and children. Men, too, when they hand over part or all of their wages to their wives, both acknowledge their obligations as husband and father and assert that they are making a gift, since they never ask for any accounting, and wives are free to save or spend any surplus as they please. Ironically but not surprisingly, many women feel rather burdened by these gifts and prefer the autonomy that arises from earning and spending their own cash. Malays often emphasize the unrepayable nature of gifts, capturing this notion in the phrase “debts of kindness go with you to the grave” (hutang budi dibawa mati). Even in conjugal relationships that are built on exchange, it is less burdensome to be the donor than the recipient.

The claim that cash or unpaid labor are gifts depends on an assertion of individualized claims to labor, even within marriage, an idea drawn from the broader Malay cultural repertoire discussed earlier. The customary and legal obligations of men and women to their spouses are viewed as secondary to the voluntary acts of will that initiate and sustain marriage partnerships. Yet in claiming their unpaid labor services as gifts, women in Singapore are on thin ground. Since domestic services performed inside the home do not command a “real” wage, there is a sense in which their commodity value, and therefore also their gift dimension, is denied and devalued. Taking an alternative approach, some women press for a recognition of the direct commodity value of their labor, pointing out that the money men give them is not actually a gift but the pay they have earned for services performed. Yet they voice this claim only in a teasing or joking manner, or when pressed by anger and disappointment. Lacking the proof of worth that comes from actually receiving a wage, they know they cannot go too far in seeking to redefine the meaning and value attached to their labor. More than this, women have an emotional and financial stake in a conjugal relationship built on personal commitment and generosity. Men who have paid their debts might feel free to depart and purchase domestic services elsewhere. To emphasize the gift dimension in the relationship is to invest in the long term.

The sense that they are able to construct enduring conjugal bonds through their voluntary commitments as autonomous adults, and specifically through a process of the exchange of goods and services as gifts, is a source of pride and moral worth for Singapore Malays. When gifts are used to build and maintain social relationships, the calculations embedded in them are left implicit and sometimes denied. The underlying calculations made by each partner become more explicit, however, when divorce is imminent. At that point, the couple has no more interest in framing their relationship in terms that build and sustain social ties. It is in the context of divorce, too, that the notional equivalence of women’s unpaid domestic services and men’s wages exchanged within the conjugal contract breaks apart. When the idiom of gifts loses its force and attraction, the vulnerability of women’s position is fully exposed.

I noted earlier that not only the initial capital but also the labor power and labor product of husband and wife remain their separate property during the marriage. It is the product of their joint labor (most obviously through a sex-sequential labor process) that is divided between them upon divorce. In Singapore, the work of the homemaker wife and the wage-earning husband are conducted in separate spheres, take different forms (waged, unwaged), and carry different meanings (real work, not work). Upon divorce, it transpires that a wife’s contribution of domestic services is not translatable into a claim on the property her husband has accumulated through his labor. On this point, the rulings of the Muslim family court are consistent with the views expressed by Malay men and women about their respective entitlements.

In ten cases of property settlement observed in Singapore in 1982, the wives did not make any claims on the goods the men had bought with their earnings. As one woman stated, “it is his money, it is his body that works, they are his things not mine” (Li 1989:33–40). Women’s sense of the devalued status of their labor contribution was expressed especially with regard to housing bought out of the husband’s wage. Wives commented that they were mere lodgers on their husband’s property. They felt they had no right to the house as the husband had paid for
it, while they simply stayed home and did not work. Government housing rules actually decree that the marital home is the joint property of husband and wife, regardless of who earned the money, and that each is entitled to a half share. When this information was conveyed to divorcing men by court officials, some were dismayed, asking how a wife could possibly have a share if she had not paid one cent toward the purchase. Women claimed only the goods they had purchased out of their own earnings or savings from market money, or those they had received directly as gifts.19

Besides paying for their house or flat, wage workers in Singapore must contribute a sizeable portion of their income (up to 25%) to the Central Provident Fund. They can access this fund for housing and medical expenses, but most of it is released in a lump sum at the official retirement age of 55. Non-wage-earning wives have no fund of their own; many Malay husbands who receive this money give their wives a share, phrased as a gift. But a woman who is divorced before her husband has access to the fund stands to lose out entirely on the long-term accumulated product of her husband’s labor. In private interviews Malay women often mentioned this inequality, sometimes with bitterness, but it was not raised in any of the divorce proceedings I witnessed. The official nature of the fund, its many rules and restrictions, the inaccessibility of the cash before the appointed time, and its direct association with the labor of the individual whose wages had been channelled there combined to separate the fund, both in time and in space, from women’s everyday labor in the home. Women could grumble, but they did not make claims.

The power and the property claims associated with direct access to wages derive from a reworking of the labor theory of property in a context where the rhythms and cycles of men’s and women’s work have become quite distinct. Women’s everyday assertions of autonomy and personhood built from their giftlike provision of domestic services indicate a domain of contested meanings. Except where divorce is imminent, the contestation is usually muted and indirect. For many women, it makes more sense to emphasize the “eating together” component of the conjugal relationship, subsuming and downplaying the issues that arise from the fact that husband and wife actually “work separately” and are differentially rewarded for their efforts.

reworking tradition, staking claims: labor and property in upland Sulawesi

In this section I discuss the processes through which men and women create and lay claim to property in the form of land and trees. My discussion concerns the Lauje people, indigenous shifting cultivators numbering about 30,000 who inhabit the narrow coastal plain and hilly interior of the Bay of Tomini, on the northern peninsula of Sulawesi, Indonesia.20 Lauje hill farmers grow food crops (maize, tubers, and hill rice) on swidden fields as well as cash crops for regional and international markets. Most of those on the coast and in the first range of hills are Muslim, while Christianity is slowly spreading among the Lauje living closer to the center of the peninsula.

The Lauje, like the Malays described earlier, espouse a “labor theory of property.” The idea that individuals are the owners of their labor power is quite highly developed and manifest in various ways.21 At its simplest, a man walking through the forest who spots a valuable resin or sago tree only has to work for a few minutes clearing the brush around it to claim it as his own. He can bring a legal case against anyone who disturbs his tree. He can also give or sell the tree to another person if he wishes or exchange it for a tree in a more convenient location. Any of these transactions would put an end to his claim: the property is fully his and also fully separable from him, as alienable as any commodity. If he dies and his tree is claimed by his descendants, however, their rights are much less complete: not only are there likely to be many of them, each claiming a share, but, since none of them invested labor in creating the property, they are all, in a sense, borrowing it from him. His labor invested in the product marks it as his, even after his death.22
Land, the key to the livelihood of swidden farmers and, in many cultural contexts, an item in which a collectivity such as a kin group has definite rights, can also be alienated by the individual who first clears a plot of primary forest. Stories from the 1920s tell of men who had cleared land and exchanged it for two axes or a new pair of pants, purchased on the coast. Some men who liked to live on the forest frontier routinely cleared land and traded it to others who moved in behind them, forming more densely settled hamlets and farming the secondary forest. Even in the absence of an “open” market in land, the huge effort required to clear a plot, combined with the possibility of trade and exchange, always marked it as an alienable commodity. Nowadays, a man can sell land he has cleared for cash or gamble it away, but the cultural basis for individualized ownership has not changed.

The strongest claims to property can be made when a person has labored alone. Most labor processes, however, involve more than one person and claims over the product are more complex. They depend on the meanings attributed to different labor practices and the negotiated terms upon which these practices are combined. As in the Singapore example, a woman’s work in one sphere does not provide a claim on a man’s labor product when he is engaged in a separate, apparently autonomous sphere. A man who invests a season’s labor in clearing primary forest depends for his subsistence during that period on the food that his wife produces on the second-year swiddens. Yet women do not claim to own a share of the new land, which is associated only with men’s direct labor. Similarly, if men go off to earn wages extracting ebony or rattan in the headwaters, women do not claim a share of their income. At most, they grumble when men bring nothing home, not even a new shirt for one of the children.

The Lauje recognize and comment on the need, desire, and, indeed, the right of men, women, and children to engage in their own productive ventures and to have control over the product of their labor. On this basis, they are able to experience the pride that comes from the ability to make gifts and thereby to enter as autonomous persons into relationships with others. In the past, a man would divide up a plot of land he had cleared and give a section to his wife and each child of working age to farm. On this land, each would grow the normal food crops, hill rice and maize, and each would store the harvest separately, experiencing directly the relationship between labor and reward. Some of the food would be brought out by each person to add to the family cooking pot, “eating together” being central to the definition of the household unit. But the owner of the crop, the one who had undertaken the tedious work of weeding and tending it, was entitled to alienate at least some of the product through gifts or trade. Food has always been in short supply in the dry foothills and on the coast, and some hill farmers continue to barter their produce for salt fish, salt, clothing, knife blades, and other goods with Lauje who walk up into the hills for this purpose.

Few people today bother to divide up the food gardens, but ownership of cash crops such as onions and garlic lies quite clearly with the individual women, men, and children who plant them. Labor arrangements include share agreements, where husband and wife (or other kin or neighbors) work together on a crop and share the proceeds equally between them. Commonly, husband and wife maintain separate fields but routinely exchange labor: “Today we will plant my field, tomorrow yours.” Where one party invests significant amounts of labor in the field of another without reciprocation in like form, typically, when a woman weeds and tends her husband’s shallot crop during his absence, she expects her labor to be recognized with a share of the proceeds.

Husband and wife are deemed responsible for household provisioning, each drawing on separate (often secret) stores of cash when food needs to be purchased. Many women are fairly successful in retaining control over their personal income, at least in the short term. Over the longer term, however, the precarious nature of hillside farming under degraded swidden conditions, the uncertainties caused by weather, pests, and market prices, and the ever-present threat of illness and premature death have made the issue of accumulation somewhat irrelevant.
Ideally, it is generosity and noncalculation which characterize the conjugal bond. Although husband and wife may work separately, they eat together, both literally and in the broader sense of being generous when their fortune is good.

Over the past few years, the introduction into the Lauje hills of tree crops such as cocoa and cloves has given the issue of property ownership an entirely new significance. Ancestral land is becoming privatized, and tree groves are squeezing out former land uses. The question of how ownership in trees and land will be established, and by whom, has become a crucial issue for negotiation within the conjugal relationship as well as among kin, neighbors, and others interested in gaining a stake in the economic potential of the Lauje hills. At the center of struggles over ownership is the definition of the value and meaning of specific types of labor investment.

An individual who wishes to plant trees must first establish exclusive rights over land. Most of the pioneers who cleared the land in the Lauje hills are long gone, and their numerous descendants are engaged in a competitive process of staking individual claims to the pool of land they previously “borrowed” from their ancestors for use as swiddens. Consistent with the labor theory of property explored earlier, cousins, siblings, and other coinheritors recognize that a man who transforms ancestral land by investing a significant amount of labor in it (clearing the plot and establishing trees) has, in effect, created a new piece of property. His labor investment renders moot claims based solely on ancestral clearing generations ago. He can only be dislodged by someone willing to compensate him for that labor investment.

While everyone agrees that all descendants have equal rights to inherited land regardless of sex, men and women differ significantly in their capacity to operationalize their claims. First, men are more prominent in the public sphere of interhousehold relations, especially where it involves land disputes, and claim to have more knowledge about the boundaries of the plots cleared by men of previous generations. Second, men who have identified a patch of ancestral land can consolidate their claims by investing their labor immediately and directly. A woman must depend on her husband to do the crucial “initiating” and property-establishing work of clearing and tree planting for her. A woman whose husband is absent, incapacitated, or simply lazy cannot lay effective claim to her own inheritance and loses out to her brothers and cousins, each scrambling for a larger share. Finally, since the husband’s labor is needed to clear the plot, his labor entitles him to a share in the trees. Unless they have the cash to pay someone to clear land for them, women generally end up sharing their inherited land and its newly planted trees with their husbands.

Women have engaged in two distinct strategies in their attempt to secure a stake in the land and trees on which their future and fortune depend. Both strategies involve the labor theory of property and the redeployment of familiar ideas and arguments to make new claims. One strategy involves women investing labor in a sequential process. They make themselves busy weeding and tending the young cocoa seedlings their husbands have planted, thereby asserting that the trees are jointly owned. They point to the example of neighbors or outsiders who have cleared and planted large areas, sometimes with the purpose of monopolizing land, only to end up with nothing because the overgrown seedlings died. Men’s work may establish tree gardens, but women’s consistent care is needed for the trees to survive and thrive and the claim over the land to be consolidated.

Although there is general agreement that successful tree gardens are established through the joint labor of husband and wife, women feel uncertain about their effective power to claim a half share in the case of divorce. They have very little experience with the division of permanent, immovable property. Previously, women and men could separate and take with them their tools, personal clothing, cash savings (usually secret), and perhaps a share of the rice harvest, but there was no long-term accumulation that could be regarded as their joint product. Women also express a fear that their husbands could sell the trees to meet gambling debts,
leaving their rights out of account. While men and women agree that they should consult before selling joint property, practice is another matter. Once the trees are sold, women have no means of redress.

To address their vulnerability in relation to jointly owned property, some women have adopted the alternative strategy of planting trees independently. They avoid seeking any assistance from their husbands which could jeopardize their individual ownership rights. This strategy can be used only if women have cash to pay other men to work for them. To soften their stance, women insist that no break in conjugal harmony is intended: “We work separately, but if anything comes of our efforts, we eat together.”\textsuperscript{26} By using the commoditized labor of other men, they avoid long-term obligations; debts of kindness, if help is offered as a gift; or entailments on the property itself, if the person who assists later claims a share in return for his labor. The paid worker has worked but has not invested personhood nor acquired any rights beyond the right to the agreed wage at prevailing local rates.\textsuperscript{27} This mechanism to secure individualized property rights is double-edged. Men can also pay workers to establish and maintain cocoa gardens, never calling on their wives’ labor, and therefore making it difficult for women to assert claims to these trees as joint conjugal property. Both men and women, if they have capital, can buy tree gardens already formed. In this case, their partner has no claim.

The mechanisms through which women and men make their claims to individual property are identical, but their capacity to acquire such property is not the same. Women are disadvantaged in their access to sources of capital. They are excluded from the wage opportunities in the wider regional economy to which men turn when in need of cash. Women may perform wage labor in the neighborhood but the pay is low and sometimes received in-kind: women carry home a bundle of corn to feed the family for a few days or a new sarong needed immediately as a blanket for a child. The rhythms of this type of wage work do not permit accumulation and investment. It is shallot production that provides women with lump sums of cash, but crop disease and the space and attention given over to tree crops have greatly reduced shallot incomes in the past five years.

Women’s capacity to own trees independently is also hindered by the male bias of government interventions in the hills. On the primary data collection forms for the 1990 national census, all Lauje women were classified as housewives, despite the fact that the census takers (all male) were themselves Lauje and that women can be seen at work in their gardens everywhere in the hills. Now that land is being registered and taxed for the first time, women’s independent claims to land and trees and their claims to own property jointly with their husbands have been entirely ignored. All the land and trees have been registered in the name of the husband as “head of household,” informalizing women’s claims and rendering their labor contributions invisible to the official sphere. State readings of women’s roles have led to their exclusion from the farmers’ groups through which free inputs (seedlings, tools, fertilizers) are distributed, thereby disadvantaging women in their struggle to hold onto resources and establish new assets during this period of agrarian transition.\textsuperscript{28}

State laws, programs, and ideologies have provided men with a new set of idioms for asserting and legitimating claims to contested resources. So far, however, the potential damage to women’s interests caused by state interventions has been limited by three factors. First, there is the practice of settling property disputes and divorce cases “on the spot,” under the guidance of hamlet leaders. The Lauje hills are sufficiently remote that, at least for the moment, local understandings of the property rights deriving from labor investment prevail and the dictates of state ideology or Islamic doctrines are seldom invoked. Second, in response to the “gift” of seedlings from the state, some men have chosen to share their good fortune with their wives and other kin, thus mitigating the impact of state biases. Finally, with or without official recognition or access to state largesse, women are continuing to plant trees alone or together with their husbands and to assert property claims. While there is little public discussion of the
meaning and value of the new labor processes (discussion of the kind that occurs in the context of divorce settlements), the meanings of things and relationships are being negotiated through the apparently mundane and unmarked sphere of everyday labor: being present in the field and working can be, in itself, a political act.

conclusion

Building on the insights of feminist scholars working in Africa, this article has investigated the relationship between personhood, property, and the conjugal contract in Southeast Asia. It has attempted to expose some patterns evident in the region as a whole, as well as the unique practices and understandings which emerge when conjugal relations are negotiated through everyday work and exchange under specific material conditions. Here I draw conclusions focused around the issue of power. I also tease out some of the ways in which travel to Southeast Asia has enriched the body of theory with which I began, pointing to the potential of comparative ethnography to do theoretical work.

In much feminist research, especially of the “women and development” genre, the expansion of market relations and the intervention of the state in local affairs are seen to occasion a one-way demise of women’s economic position and a reduction in their autonomy. Running counter to the image of women as victims, a growing number of empirical studies document the regional and class differences between women which lead some to gain from their engagements with market and state at the same time as others lose out. To move beyond generalities and investigate the issue of women’s position more closely, the Africanist literature to which I turned suggests the need to take into account a wide set of relationships and to pay attention to changes emerging over different time periods. It also argues for a more nuanced reading of power and closer attention to the range of strategies and practices through which agency is exercised.

My Southeast Asian examples illustrate the limits of state power and the contradictory effects of state interventions. State legal systems that acknowledge women’s right to retain personal property and support their claims to a share in conjugal assets strengthen women’s position even as other state programs and assumptions undermine it. In Singapore, the state’s ruling that the marital home is joint property regardless of individual cash contributions has protected women’s interests where the Malay labor theory of property left them vulnerable, but women have lost out on long-term accumulation through the official savings scheme. In the remoteness of the Lauje hills, state presence of any kind is relatively weak. Women have therefore not been protected by official legal recognition of women’s property rights. Neither, however, have they been seriously undermined by the male bias of the few programs that do reach the hills. In both Singapore and Sulawesi official rules about property tend to confirm what women already know: that their strongest claims to property derive from engaging directly in production. Only labor rewarded by wages, or labor that directly produces property, permits women to negotiate conjugal exchanges from a position of strength.

My examples also demonstrate that women have much to gain, as well as the potential to lose, from an increase in market relations. Marx anticipated a unilinear trend, arguing that more commoditization would lead to the detriment of particular classes. Had he considered questions of gender, he might have gone on to investigate how, commoditization notwithstanding, individuals do in fact form enduring bonds. This question arises with particular clarity in Southeast Asia, suggesting the need to press beyond the formulations of Marx and Whitehead and develop this body of theory in a new direction. My case studies reveal some rather complex ways in which individuals use commoditized forms of exchange to link and distance themselves. In Singapore, Malay women highlight the commoditized value of their labor in order to emphasize the significance of their gift and to tie wage-earning men and children into a sphere of moral obligation. They seek not to detach themselves from conjugal exchanges but to embed
themselves and their labor more deeply. But their claims are undermined by the location of their domestic labor in a sphere that is unrecognized and unrewarded by the market. In Indonesia, women make use of commoditized labor to secure their independent property claims but see their own claims against their husbands made vulnerable by the same argument.

Both men and women, anxious to secure their individual rights over property, have proceeded at times by seeking to embed their labor in a joint labor process and, at other times, by working separately. Where Whitehead found that women’s property claims were strongest in a sex-segmented labor process, my studies show that both sex-sequential and sex-segregated labor processes can be vehicles for the establishment of women’s property rights. In the two cases I explore, the key issue is not the form of the division of labor itself, but the extent to which the labor investment is clearly and directly connected to the creation of the property in question. Women (and men) become especially vulnerable when the connection between their work and that of their spouse is obscured. They must then make use of various practical and discursive strategies to render the connections more obvious.

My examples also point to the diverse modes and channels through which power is exercised. The power of the bureaucracy to define rights and rewards is particularly significant in urban Singapore, although less so in upland Indonesia. Malay women’s attempts to advance their claims in Singapore take place largely in the arena of everyday discourse: talking about labor and relationships in ways that emphasize their gift dimension. But, confronted with market definitions of value and forced to lay out the basis of conjugal exchanges in the official setting of the family court, the language with which they frame their everyday claims is abandoned. Out of context, it has no power.

In upland Indonesia, practical strategies seem to be at least as significant as discursive ones. Men and women assert the power of their own labor by quietly deploying it in the situations where it counts—in the fields where the grounds for current and future claims to productive resources are being laid. They comment only that, while working (and owning) separately, they eat together, thereby leaving unspoken the ongoing adjustments and negotiations that arise as they reposition themselves and reconfigure their relationships with each other.

In many contexts, including those discussed here, there is no legitimate field of discourse or “counterpoint on gender” (Risseeuw 1988) in which the changing nature of rights and privileges is publicly discussed. Therefore, major changes in gender relations may occur piecemeal, without provoking crises or laying bare the workings and distribution of power. Resistance is, in such situations, too strong a word. There is, however, plenty of evidence that both women and men are active in shaping the patterns of social and economic life which emerge from their quiet, quotidian engagements.

notes

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank the editor of American Ethnologist and several external reviewers for the constructive criticism that contributed significantly to the final form of this article.


2. Note also that, despite decades of ethnographic research on concepts of the person, scholars attempting to characterize modernity continue to rely on a contrast between the individualistic, detached modern person and a rather unspecified, group-embedded other. See, for example, Friedmann 1994: 212–227. Carrier’s critique (1992) is relevant here.

3. Djamour (1959), Swift (1963), and Rudie (1995) examine the Malay conjugal relationship and some of its economic dimensions. Peletz (1988) and McKinley (1975) pay more attention to siblingship as an axis of gendered property relations. Personhood and property in the conjugal context have been intensively scrutinized in Melanesia (e.g., Strathern 1988). Space prevents me from engaging with this literature here. The reasons for the difference in emphasis in gender studies on the various continents could, perhaps, be the subject of another paper (cf. Appadurai 1986b).
4. For a rich discussion of the problems women face in exercising control over property in south Asia, see Agarwal 1994.

5. For generalizations along these lines and specific citations, see Errington 1990; Karim 1995; Ong 1989; and Winzeler 1974.

6. Arguing for a more critical stance toward a gendered prestige system and men’s much-stated spiritual potency, Brenner (1995) notes that Javanese men are widely (but informally) acknowledged to be incapable of controlling their selfish desires; women must therefore take over as guardians and promoters of family spiritual welfare, prestige, and financial stability. Peletz (1995) notes similar views of men’s disabilities in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, but is concerned to locate the reasons for (some) men’s failings as husbands in the history of the regional economy and in terms of class position.

7. Karim argues that Western feminists are still overly focused on women’s exclusion from the public domain, and ignore or trivialize the invisible, informal, nonbureaucratized, and indirect forms through which women’s power is exercised. These include silence, withdrawal, sorcery, avoidance of open confrontation, and “hostile harmony” (1995:12, 20). Karim argues that these forms of power are as effective as the power exercised by men in public. For an example of the indirect strategies used by women to exert control over property in Minangkabau, see Krier 1995; note, however, that in the case Krier describes, women were forced through weakness to talk too much and thus appear “out of control,” while men, their power established, were silent.


10. Divorce rates have characteristically been high in much of Southeast Asia: approximately 50 percent at least up to the 1960s. For more statistics and a discussion of the problems of measuring divorce and its impact, see Li 1989:34.

11. Bowen (1988) points out that Indonesia’s national legal system assumes a gender-neutral bilateralism to be the prevailing national custom; as a result, courts may allocate women a share of inherited and marital property even in areas such as the Gayo highlands, where property was controlled by patrilineal clans. Interpretations of “tradition” in Gayo have had to work within and around national agendas.

12. The notion is not unique to Southeast Asia. For African examples, see Berry 1988a:145 and Caplan 1984. Caplan describes concepts of personhood, gendered divisions of labor, and systems of kinship and property in Muslim East Africa remarkably similar to those encountered in Southeast Asia, confirming the need for a much more broadly based comparative study than that attempted here.

13. Geertz (1961:49–50, 125), discussing market traders in Java, suggests that all of the partners’ labor and property is joint, but does not explain how, in practical terms, men and women identify and lay claim to each other’s earnings, especially where their activities take place in the urban informal sector. See my discussion in Li 1989:31–33. Wazir Karim (1995) notes that, for Malay women, separate and secret savings are a normal strategy for maintaining autonomy within marriage. On the significance of autonomy for Malay women and the strategies that differently positioned women pursue, see also Rudie 1995.

14. Malays live side by side with the majority Chinese population (77%), mostly in high-rise flats, and are fully integrated into the urban economy (Li 1989:93–98). For more information on Singapore, the methodology and results of my field study, and a full discussion of the issues raised briefly in this section, see Li 1989. See also Li 1997b.

15. If they work outside the home, women are expected to meet the costs of their domestic-labor substitutes (child care, cooked food) out of their own incomes. Women therefore make sensitive calculations about the point at which it is worth their while to engage in paid work. As opportunities and pay have improved, so has their rate of labor-force participation. In the age group 25–29 (those with maximum reproductive responsibilities), 7 percent were in the labor force in 1957, and 55 percent in 1980 (Li 1989:104).

16. There are cultural precedents for the emphasis on gifts in the rural Malay world. In Java, Jay observed that substance is “the coin of social relations” and noted the significance of “making a gratuitous gift within the framework of kin expectations” (1969:44). In Malaysia, Banks (1983:138, 157) observed that inheritance is viewed as a gift, and Peletz (1988) comments on the ambivalence in relations between kin, especially siblings, where obligations created through gifts and other forms of assistance become onerous burdens.

17. Similarly, young adults phrase the portion of their wages that they give to their mother as gifts from the heart; they thereby deny that their parents have claims over their labor and emphasize their choice, as autonomous young adults, to build and maintain a relationship with their parents based on concern and generosity. See Li 1989:41–73.

18. Some women are more sanguine in demanding direct compensation from working children: “I wash your clothes and cook your food, now I want my pay!” In claiming their pay, however, mothers potentially undermine the gift dimension of these transactions and the pride that comes from having children who are loving and generous. In contrast to McKinley (1975) and Carsten (1989), I argue that, far from being a pure realm unsullied by market considerations, the household is a sphere of economic transactions, although the calculations underlying these transactions are seldom made explicit. Economic transactions are not the antithesis of emotional bonds, but part of the process through which such bonds are created and sustained. As Djoum 1959 and Swift 1963 emphasize, the significance of jewelry as a form of long-term saving for women. They also note that husbands make the heart; they thereby deny that their parents have claims over their labor and emphasize their choice, as
gifts of jewelry with the dual purpose of building the relationship and endowing their wives with assets that will enable them to withstand contingencies such as widowhood and divorce.

20. For general descriptions of the area, see Nourse 1989 and Li 1991.

21. Although Nourse’s thesis (1989) is focused mainly on Lauje beliefs and practices surrounding birth, curing, and communication with the spirit world and does not directly address the relationship between personhood and property, some of her observations indicate a sense of the spiritual uniqueness of individuals akin to that encountered in other literature on the Malay world explored earlier (see especially Nourse 1989: 314–320).

22. Similarly, Singapore Malays who inherit property feel an ongoing burden of debt toward the person whose actions first created it (see Li 1989: 70–71).

23. See Li 1996b for a discussion of Lauje children’s rights to the product of their labor and the absence of “the household” as a unit of ownership or production.

24. For a discussion of the class dimensions of this transition and the role of the state, see Li 1996a and 1997a.

25. There is no documentation on either marriage or divorce in the Lauje hills, and most of these transactions are never formally registered. My impression is that divorce in the early years of marriage is quite common, but that well-established relationships rarely falter. Regardless of the rate, women frequently mentioned the topic to me. From this I conclude that the possibility or threat of divorce is significant to them, and they shape their strategies accordingly. Divorce cases are settled by a group of informally acknowledged and officially designated hamlet leaders, all male. Islamic ideas may weigh into these proceedings, but do not necessarily dominate them. It is rare for an Islamic official to be present. Some of the observations made by Tsing (1990) on women’s disadvantages in informal dispute settlement processes may be relevant here.

26. Young unmarried women and men also use the strategy of working alone: a father described watching his teenage daughter struggle to transport tree seedlings on her own. He observed that she did not want to ask for his help, in case he later claimed a return on his labor.

27. Note that, rather than opposing commodities and commoditized relationships as some of the eco-feminist literature would imply (e.g., Mies and Shiva 1993), Lauje women prefer to make use of the wage form since it permits an effective separation of property from labor.

28. Benda-Beckmann (1988) observes that development programs and projects often have quasi-legal implications in the way they sequester and redistribute resources according to their own sets of rules. In one Indonesian case, she found the results to be markedly “gender-skewed” to the detriment of women. For a parallel argument in relation to Africa, see Whitehead 1990: 62.

29. See, for example, Stamp 1989 for a review of evidence that involvement in commodity production has impoverished African women in relation to men. See Mohanty 1991 and Moore 1988 for critiques of the portrayal of women in the developing world as perennial victims.


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submitted: October 16, 1995
revised version submitted: November 8, 1996
accepted: June 26, 1997