

ILOCANO MASCULINITIES

*Alicia T. Pingol**

Due to the higher demand of Ilocano women for overseas work since the 1980s, more children have been left in the care of their fathers. Leading as it has to a change in the domestic role of these men, this development has encouraged them to redefine their masculine self. The general view of Ilocano masculinity is that men must be good providers, virile partners and responsible fathers. When wives are absent, this perception is shaken.

In this article, I examine this process of masculine redefinition. The research for it was undertaken in Ilocos Norte in 1997 and covered households where the wife worked overseas and the husband was left to care for the children. In it I tackle three issues arising from the aforesaid development. The first is the inability of some men to reconstruct their masculine selves. In the reorganization of their families, fathers are obliged to assume their wives' nurturing role and provide for the family's emotional needs. While many men respond to this challenge creatively, others fail to do so. The second issue is the impact of the overseas migration of women on their husbands' relations with their mothers-in-law. Following their wives' departure, men frequently come under the watchful eye of mothers-in-law who, aware that sexual activity is an important facet of male identity, closely monitor their fidelity. The last issue I address is the greater self-awareness that is inculcated in men as they consciously redefine their masculine identity.

* Alicia Tadeo-Pingol, Ph.D., teaches at Don Mariano Marcos State University in Batac, Ilocos Norte, Philippines.

A Constructionist View

I explore how men fabricate new masculine selves from two perspectives. The first, that of socialization, views masculine identity as framed by local culture, in which traditional beliefs, values and norms are embedded in the male psyche. The second perspective, that of constructionism, supplements the first. It regards masculine identity as an active and continuing project. Given that the men considered in this study occupy novel and unstable roles as a result of the global economy, it is a particularly useful position from which to observe the transformation of male selves.

According to the constructionist perspective, actions may originate from a range of sources: one's emotional state or personal motives; one's class position or gender orientation; the consequence of past actions or the subject's understanding of the possibility of future action.¹ The perspective thus emphasizes less predictable and differentiated causes of action. The constructionist and socialization perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Social structure may impose certain limits on subjects, but it does not render them totally powerless to define themselves. For instance, poverty may limit one's choices, but it does not necessarily limit how one views oneself, how one considers one's condition, or how one regards oneself as a provider.

Many of the subjects of this study often reflected on their situations. The rules that used to guide them in their daily life no longer seemed relevant. Their new circumstances encouraged a redefinition of their masculinity. Since they had to explore roles, the redefinitions they arrived at varied. In the process of investigating these selves, they were led to challenge the traditional nature of masculinity. Their daily life revolved around their being the *ama ti familia* (father of the family) even when they were non-earners; the master in bed, even if they were not sexually active; effective nurturers, even when they were not as emotionally demonstrative as most mothers. Masculinity, therefore, is a product of external influences and individual choices. These men encroach into the female domain but remain men by being in control. Confronted by unusual situations, such as being a house husband or suspecting an erring wife, the men interviewed reflected on their options and acted accordingly. Rather than succumbing to the situation, they remained in control. Many of them continued to be providers even if they earned less than their wives.

Others were full-time house husbands. In both positions they adhered to conventional masculine ideology (defined in terms of being in control). For them,

performing their additional roles called for the need to manage and endure greater suffering. Their ability to handle their pain—physical and mental—demonstrated their capacity to meet local norms governing male behavior. However, as these men assumed traditional female roles, they redefined themselves in the process.

This reconceptualization of identity, although framed within the local culture, remains an unfinished project. Since local norms generally cover only traditional relations, new standards emerge as they are actualized in a reordered self. As a consequence of globalization, the reordering of the self has become a continuous process. Even non-OCW (overseas contract worker) households are globalized, having been penetrated by Hollywood movies, MTV and other forms of entertainment that reshape people's mode of thinking. When a member of a family works abroad, the household's globalization becomes more intense, as the member who comes into direct contact with other societies shapes its lifestyles and aspirations.

Reconstruction of Family Roles

The educational expense of children is the major reason given for seeking overseas employment. Men are identifiable within a context—their relations with themselves, with their wives and families, with their communities. When their wives are absent, their psychological and sexual needs are unrequited, often for several years. This deprivation is endured because their marriages revolve around the economic well-being of their families, especially as it is secured through their children's education. In these difficult circumstances, men project a new masculine image of efficiency through managing remittances, remaining strong against temptation and becoming responsive to their children's needs. Ideally, they become adept housekeepers, chaste spouses and maternal fathers. These are the characteristics that win them love and respect from their children and their in-laws. While these traits may be traditional markers of femininity, house husbands stress the efficiency with which they meet the demands of their new domestic role.

The outcome of sole father parenting becomes obvious as children grow up. Farmers tend to view children as potential assistants and inheritors of the family farm. But children now realize that farming means a bare subsistence. The

fact that their mothers work abroad opens up other possibilities. But the difficulty of finding a local job, even as college graduates, frequently forces them to seek work abroad. Some become domestic workers (DH) like their mothers, or work as seamen on foreign ships. If their fathers are college graduates and are employed in the formal sector, children tend to have better chances of obtaining professional work locally. But many farming households are unable to provide the children with adequate information in choosing careers.

Danny, for example, is respected by his sons. They excel in the field where he also excels in. He is an elementary mathematics teacher and his two sons also specialized in mathematics. Although Danny drinks heavily, fortunately, his sons did not acquire this habit. They claim to have been disciplined against alcohol in their early years.

Malalaki (macho men) strive to earn their children's respect by curbing their undesirable habits. There are several cases to illustrate this. Benjie's confinement to domestic life restrains him from gambling. Zandy controls himself with other women as an example to his daughter, lest she succumbs to masculine seduction. The notion that daughters pay for their father's misdeeds is expressed in the Ilocano saying, "*adda pagbayad ti utang*" (someone to repay debts), uttered when a girl is born.

Other responses to a wife's absence are less benign. Bancio's brand of machismo manifests itself in the form of drunken violence towards his children. Yet when sober he is gentle and does all the cooking, even though his daughters are old enough to assume that role. He also supplements his wife's earnings. Jose's sons started drinking with their *barkada* (friends) after seeing their father habitually drunk. Bancio's and Jose's children no longer respect them and refuse to assist in farm work. The machismo of the men above seems to be a manifestation of their insecurity. After all, their wives have an edge over them, and this tends to make their wives the dominant partner in the relationship.

There are other cases where the wives become dominant. An example is Sheila. Her parents, who are in Saudi Arabia, contribute to her expenses. Tonet's uncle provided the land to build their house in, helping them to keep their building expenses at a lower price. Ely earns much more than an ordinary domestic worker in Hong Kong, since she can pose as a Chinese national with her proficiency in the language and can work part time. All of these women tend to be the dominant partner in their relationships. Dong, Ely's husband, had political ambitions and had squandered most of Ely's earnings in politics. Their children have not been

successful in school, despite being given better opportunities. But Dong retains his self-respect through his political activities. In his case, his participation in politics secures his masculine identity despite his failure in most other areas of domestic life.

Children's recognition of the mother as the principal provider results in their bonding with her. Fathers who have maintained their sway over their children do not feel the need to compete with their wives in gaining their children's loyalty. But fathers who do lose their authority often withdraw from family life. Their isolation is reflected not only in alcoholism but also in the neglect of their children. Hence, these men's behavior is inconsistent with the rationale given for their partners' employment abroad. When husbands detach themselves from the family, their sons tend to leave the house more often. Moreover, the mother's absence forces the children to assume greater responsibility for the housework. Daughters tend to be more obliging than sons. However, the isolation of fathers from the family sometimes encourages less dependent personalities. Fathers rationalize their lack of involvement with the expression: "*Dadakkeldan, adda nakemdan*" ("They are now grown up, they have their own mind already"). The children of such men usually show little concern for them.

How can men continue to be manly when they are no longer the main providers, are not sexually active, and have lost their authority over the family? They express their situation thus: "*Ammok ti luglugarek*" ("I know where I stand"). Once they locate their new position, they interpret and construct new meanings rather than just conform to traditional expectations.

Under Surveillance

Interfering in-laws only aggravate the precariousness of marital relations. House husbands become even more sensitive as they interact with their in-laws. Constantly watched by mothers-in-law, house husbands need to behave in accordance with expectations to deflect possible censure. If they fall short of those expectations, conflict invariably follows—first between themselves and their mothers-in-law, later with their wives. Normally officious mothers-in-law are driven by a concern for their daughters, but sometimes they can be bent on wresting control of their daughters' earnings. By informing their daughters of the

incompetence, inadequacy or infidelity of their husbands, a mother-in-law can erode a son-in-law's reputation and authority and simultaneously establish her own influence in her daughter's household.

The case of Lanio, whose wife works overseas, illustrates these generational tensions nicely. One day, Lanio discovered that his mother-in-law had been sending his wife letters that claim he had been unfaithful. Although the allegations were baseless, his wife believed them, despite his protests. In apparent revenge, she then had a relationship with a man. Despite this lapse, Lancio was willing to forgive his wife. To exonerate himself of his mother-in-law's malicious fabrications, he began to observe a strict code of conduct. For instance, he ordered his house off-limits to other women (including this researcher). He may have lost his control over his wife, but he retains his authority over their family. To gain respectability, he observes a routine that puts him above suspicion, thereby proving that his mother-in-law's accusations are groundless.

Husbands reorient themselves following changing tasks or affinal conflicts. On the other hand, mothers-in-law maintain their traditional expectations of their sons-in-law. Hence, husbands of OCWs are still judged by conventional standards. They may perform their house duties well, remain chaste husbands and affectionate fathers, but such men do not necessarily earn the respect of their mothers-in-law. In the latter's eyes, their very acceptance of their situation already condemns them. When their mothers-in-law were young wives, they respected their husbands, being the primary providers. This made a husband the legitimate authority ("*ama ti familia*"). If a man cannot meet this standard, and instead depends on his wife as the main provider, then mothers-in-law feel that their daughters have been cheated. The new global demands for women's labor have created contradictions within local-traditional norms. Some people reinforce tradition (mothers-in-law), while others challenge it (*e.g.* overseas wives and local husbands). In the past, it was the daughter-in-law who was watched and judged by her mother-in-law for her housekeeping and domestic qualities; formerly, conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law was very common. Now, for OCW households, the conflict has changed. It is now the son-in-law who is intensely watched by his mother-in-law, who is dismayed that he is an inadequate provider, and that her daughter did not obtain a better husband.

But if husbands are under surveillance by their in-laws, OCW wives enjoy a new measure of autonomy. Many husbands are apprehensive that their wives might turn to other men while abroad. They hear stories of such affairs. The ways in which they keep their self-esteem intact, despite their fears, vary. Goyóng, for

instance, simply continues to trust his wife, actively resisting any suspicion of her. Jessie, on the other hand, reminds his wife that an act of adultery on her part will strip her of all rights to their children. These two men differ further in their responses. Goyong does not look for other women, while Jessie does so on the grounds that he is unable to abstain sexually for more than six months. Jessie has money, owns a vehicle, has a maid to attend to the children and lives in an urban setting. By contrast, Goyong must explore all possibilities to feed his nine children, since his wife's earnings are inadequate. Goyong seeks relief by getting drunk; it becomes his Sunday event. It is also his means of retaining some autonomy. In another case, Bong, in contrast to Goyong, had an affair. But as he became more involved, he began to fear its consequences. Before the affair got out of control, he rejoined his children in their rural village. Looking back at the affair, Bong now admits it was a mistake.

Sometimes, wives actively conspire to maintain their husbands' masculine identity. They support their husbands' need to retain their role as head of the family. Such wives work out a series of pretenses that ostensibly demonstrate their husbands' authority and their own subordination. An example is Nellie, whose husband became embroiled in a conflict with her brother. She returned home just to settle her family's problems, but made sure that the conflict was seen to be settled by her husband. Another example is Cecil, who, when on vacation, submits to her husband's sexual overtures, making him feel he is her 'master.' Other wives, who plan to extend their contracts overseas, still make a point of seeking their husbands' approval before doing so. Thus, the construction of masculinity is a project shared by both spouses.

Becoming More Reflexive

As they gain access to better jobs, wives often assume a more dominant position. This confirms Hutheesing's theory² that in a marriage, the one who obtains the symbols of modernity, such as a higher income, becomes the dominant spouse. Confronted with this development, husbands become more reflexive. For instance, whereas sex with their wives was once taken for granted, it no longer is. When women become the principal providers, they also acquire a broader latitude of sexual freedom. Their off-days overseas are devoted to activities they themselves choose. Hence, the traditional power and privilege of husbands as 'masters' of sexuality no longer hold.

Consider the following cases. Two husbands, Turo and Benny, survived their crises of manhood by becoming devoted fathers. Benny stated firmly that 'it is not only with a woman that one can show one's masculinity.' Turo exercised his authority over his first wife by insisting that she go abroad to sever her relationship with another man (in this way, he avoided a possible confrontation with her lover). Turo waited for many years, hoping his wife would return to him, but she never did. Those years of waiting made him realize that a woman is complementary to a man, a necessary partner in life. He regained his self-worth by taking another wife. None of his kin nor his first wife disapproved. When his new partner finally decided to live with him, he pointed out that his children were still his primary responsibility.

While socialization assumes that masculinity operates in accordance with the prescriptions of society, constructionism stresses masculinity as an actively sought identity. The redefinition of masculinity for Turo was an interplay of these two forces. He was socialized to believe that the male is the dominant spouse. His wife shattered that belief. His initial readiness to forgive meant subordinating himself to his wife. But he reasserted his dominance when he found another partner.

In contrast, and in another case, Danny refused to accept his wife after he discovered that she was having an affair. After some time, his wife returned to the village. Close relatives, including his sons, urged him to accept her. He resisted their pressure, insisting that he no longer loved her. Being true to himself required that he reject all attempts at reconciliation. Ilocano culture imposes a strict standard on women—female infidelity is a serious fault. Eventually, Danny forgave his wife but he refused to take her back because he no longer loved her. His earlier obligations to her and even to his children, who continue to seek their reconciliation, no longer move him. His saying "no" was an affirmation of his new identity. He realizes that his sons, who are growing into manhood and who are also arriving at their own notions of masculinity, are still trying to reconcile them. He respects their attempts. His reexamination of his life involves assessing fatherhood in relation to the ideals of his children. He redefines himself not only in relation to his wife, but also to his children, and most importantly to himself. His masculine identity is not simply the product of stable social and cultural codes. Danny does not accept his role passively. He disputes traditional codes because he feels that they constrain him. He no longer clings to the traditional male role involving psychological or physiological superiority.

Worse than the sexual abstinence endured by husbands whose wives work overseas is the fear that their wives might engage in illicit liaisons. In the cases

where these occur, the husband has to make a painful decision. Should he forgive or repudiate his wife? If the latter, is he free to initiate another relationship? In the process of answering the question, husbands have to examine their position, weigh their options and decide on desirable strategies.

The changing conditions of the men in this study required not only psychological adjustments on their part but also the revision of traditional norms. The rules that affect gender relations presuppose a reexamination of their own values and aspirations. Thus, apart from behaving within the confines of traditional norms, these men also drew from their own experiences to reorder their own lives. In the process, they reformulated their masculinity. In contrast, male OCWs who remain the main providers in their families maintain the traditional notion of masculinity. These latter follow the model of farmers who spend considerable time—often several weeks—away from home tending to their upland farms (*kaingin*). The first wave of Ilocano (male) migration resulted in high levels of spinsterhood as well as an overvaluation of female chastity in local communities.³ Presently, the results of the absence of a large number of wives from the Ilocos are not yet clearly discernible. However, an increase in alcoholism among their husbands is easily observable.

Among the men in this study, I noted the interplay between the productive and sexual dimensions. When the wife becomes the main economic provider, the husband becomes the main nurturer. The economic power of women is generally limited to decisions involving family investments and the education of children: it does not necessarily affect the sexual sphere. Some husbands remain dominant in the sexual domain or others maintain more egalitarian relationships. Wives often downplay their empowerment by showing deference, particularly in the sexual sphere, to their husbands. However, wives often orchestrate decisions so that these appear to be that of the husband in order to maintain traditional power relations. Other wives become transformed by the more liberal norms abroad. Overseas wives whose husbands are also providers tend to remain traditional. In such cases, providing husbands retain the respect of their mothers-in-law.

Separation sometimes strengthens the marital bond but may also threaten a relationship. The latter is often the result of either party entering into illicit liaisons. Connell has argued the primacy of gender relations.⁴ My research supports this view. For the *naibtor* (responsible), their sexual deprivation is handled by sublimating their energies into work and “for the children.” The less capable men

become heavy drinkers, neglecting their work and their children. The more successful men do not resist female tasks. These become vital activities to confirm their self-control. Being efficient house managers and good fathers constitute their *kinalalaki* (masculinity); no matter how great the inner conflicts they confront, they remain in control. Many house husbands at first resist female tasks, but eventually confront them as a test of their masculinity. By engaging in these nontraditional duties, they prove their masculinity. This challenges Hollnsteiner's view that men resist role reversals because housework expresses a woman's identity.⁵ In my study, housework did not necessarily feminize men. They remained masculine even when they became house husbands by retaining their self-control. To be in control means they command respect or fear from others. Ilocano masculinity occurs within a *kinalalaki-malalaki* continuum. Men express *kinalalaki* by remaining as providers, becoming self-reliant and not depending on their wives' remittances. They maintain their self-worth by not expecting much from their wives; by keeping their pain to themselves; and by showing mutual respect. *Malalaki* evoke respect through fear and a propensity for violence. A man's engagement in an illicit relationship may be viewed as *kinalalaki* or *malalaki*, depending on the circumstances. A man is *kinalalaki* if he keeps his cool, grants forgiveness or detaches himself from his erring wife. For others, they are *malalaki* if they resolve their problems destructively, either through alcoholism or violence. Bong voluntarily ended his affair as an expression of his *kinalalaki*. Turo, on the other hand, felt that a violent confrontation with his wife's lover was unavoidable as both were *malalaki*.

Connell (1995) predicts that the growing challenge of women against hegemonic masculinity in the West will eventually lead to its demise. As indicated in this study, Ilocano men strive to maintain their hegemony. They maintain it partly by adapting it to new situations. Often, their wives, although increasingly empowered, conspire to preserve this hegemony.

Recomposing masculine identity is an active project. It proceeds through the unpacking and altering of old elements. Sometimes this process of reconstruction has to keep pace with the wife's new situation while retaining the expectations of the local community. When the men considered in this study were still the only providers in their families, they were sure of themselves as the *ama ti familia*. When their wives were still around, they were sure of their maleness. Faced with new circumstances, they experienced personal crises. Most were able to prevent the dissolution of their masculinities by becoming more reflexive. Others resorted to more destructive responses, such as alcoholism and violence.

Examining the long-term effects of migration on family life requires a longer period of study. While I believe that the norms and values governing migrant families are in flux, it will take future studies to confirm value changes, how they affect children and their lasting consequences for local communities. What is certain is that under the forces of globalization, traditional roles and norms are coming under increasing pressure. While some community members are adjusting appropriately, others are not. These adjustments are themselves contradictory. Hence, husbands sometimes become innovative while mothers-in-law often stubbornly defend traditional expectations. This only indicates that innovation and conservatism are different sides of the same coin. Both indicate that identities, whether novel or traditional, have to be continuously reconstructed.

Notes

¹L. Griffin, "Narrative, Event-Analysis, and Casual Interpretation in Historical Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology*, 98 (1993).

²O. Hutheesing, "Gender at the Margins of Southeast Asia," in *'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia*, ed. W. Karim (U.S.A.: Berg Publishers, 1995).

³R. Pertierra, *Remittances & Returnees: The Cultural Economy of Migration in Ilocos* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992).

⁴R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1995).

⁵M. R. Hollnsteiner, "The Husband," in *Being Filipino*, ed. Gilda Cordero Fernando (Quezon City: GCF Books, 1981).