

Is Man to Woman as Sheep is to Bush? Private and Public Spaces in Abruzzo, central Italy

In this paper I wish to examine Abruzzese views of public and private and especially of male and female spaces. In particular, I will discuss male and female spaces in terms of emigration and local views of nature and culture. This discussion is based on my research in Liscia, a small peasant village in the mountains of central Abruzzo. I have conducted sporadic research there over the last four years totaling 10 months.

One day a young man who was showing me the magnificent panoramas from atop the hills surrounding Liscia pointed to a spot in the valley below and told me the legend of San Michele. Although not an origin myth in the strict sense, the legend of San Michele tells how Liscia came to adopt St Michael as its patron saint. As a parenthesis, most if not all local cultures in Italy, like the national ideology itself, attempt to use history as a favoured rhetorical field for situating and anchoring not only past events but also individual social strategies and collective representations. Perhaps this helps explain why this young man, who was only months away from becoming a professional engineer and had not really lived in town for several years, used this story to talk about the political significance of the local river valley, which was the site where the regional government had subsidised several new industries as part of its modernisation plans for the region.

A hunter from a neighbouring village, one of the several on the surrounding hills, was down in the valley. The river at that time had more water in it than now (and in fact, had water till several years ago, but is now dried up). Shepherds used to pasture their flocks in the valley. This hunter (poacher seems more likely, though Daniele said hunter) went to shoot a lamb that belonged to a shepherd of Liscia. As he shot the lamb, it raised its forepaw (Daniele raised his

right hand in front of him) and stopped the bullet. The hunter was so amazed that he followed it. It led him to a grotto that had been until then completely unknown to the local population because it had been covered over by thick undergrowth and bushes (“arbuste e cespuglie”). There was the Archangel Michael, and since then he has been the patron saint of Liscia. Every year processions start from there and wend there way up to the village.

There are obviously elements here drawn from standard Christian hagiography: the lamb as Christ, the Archangel Michael. Other elements seem linked to a post-medieval sensibility of ritual: the idea of procession with its all its sexual imagery of the penetration of the village walls. And there are local socio-economic bric-a-brac as well: the hunter from another village who is really a poacher (because he is from another village), the lost sheep, the local shepherd who happens to be absent or asleep, the implication of local powerlessness vis-a-vis neighbours. However, one aspect is not mentioned in the story, although I learned of it in other contexts. This valley and its bushes and undergrowth was until recently the site where capture-marriages were consummated.

Until recently, local tradition has it, many women were kidnapped by local men and taken to this spot to spend the night. The aggrieved father, uncles and brothers of the women would organise a search party to beat the bushes and recapture the woman. It mattered little if sexual relations had taken place; in fact, I was repeatedly told that it was rare (though not unknown) for the woman to be raped if she withheld her consent. What was important was that the woman had been taken from the private space of her family's protective gaze and transferred to a public (though hidden) space where sex could take place. The woman's family was dishonoured and sought amends by forcing the young man to marry her, which, of course, had been his intention in any case.

Why capture marriages? And why is honour satisfied by a forced marriage, when after all this was the kidnapper's intention all along? Obviously, the consent of the woman's family's males is hardly at issue since honour obliges them, like the kidnapper's family, to be in favour of the marriage. The real issue is the woman's consent.

There are other noteworthy dimensions to male-female relationships. First, local women often told me that one unusual characteristic of this village is the age of women at first marriage. Not only are women older at first marriage than the European norm, they are generally older than the men. My research on the demographics of the village, which has complete statistics for the period 1866-1994 and partial statistics for the period 1777 - 1865, suggests this is partially true. Second, statistics on emigration from 1960 to the present suggested that more women than men had left the village, roughly in a ratio of 3 to 2. Further research showed that this was not a new trend linked to the modernisation efforts of the federal government and the so-called Italian economic miracle. Migration had always been present, though admittedly not in the numbers after 1960. In brief, women had always left the village, and in fact more women than men had married foreigners.

A breakdown of the emigration data revealed some suggestive trends that might explain this unusual situation (unusual, that is, from the viewpoint of models and theories that privilege economic factors as the motivating factor).

For example, for over 130 years of data there is no immediate link between the peaks and valleys in the statistics on emigration and deaths before 18 (most of which occur before the age of two). In other words, if poor economic conditions are linked to infant deaths (poor nutrition, etc.), they are not responsible for decisions to emigrate.

Marriage outside the community is another dimension that emerges from the data. In fact, by emigration locals mean local migration, that is, people who leave the community yet stay in Italy. By far the largest proportion of migrants are of this type.

Between 1866 and 1994 264 women and 194 men married exogamously. The data suggest clear differences between men and women: for example, of 112 women since 1866 who married exogamously and virilocally, 13 went to San Buono and 17 to Vasto, both towns that are significantly richer than Liscia. There is no statistical significance for other choices.

These two villages are also statistically significant for the 152 women who marry exogamously by uxorilocally (husbands emigrate to Liscia). Most women in this category married men from San Buono. Other choices are not statistically significant.

Men's choices reveal a more complicated pattern: of the men who married exogamously but virilocally, 12 chose Atessa, 10 Carpinetto Sinello, 15 Carunchio, 17 Gissi, 25 Guilmi, 46 San Buono and 17 Vasto. Yet the wide net cast by the men reveals other preoccupations. These villages are generally close but with the exception of San Buono and Vasto, just as poor as Liscia.

Of the 137 men who married exogamously but uxorilocally, three destinations stand out: Gissi (11), Vasto (13) and San Buono (18). Other choices are not statistically significant.

On general, women who emigrate tend to be oriented to two towns, Vasto and San Buono. Men are not so specific nor specialised. They marry more or less everywhere.

The local discourse regarding women's life choices is consistent: women are publically powerless and subject to their husbands' will. However, unlike other parts of Italy that possess a well-defined rhetoric of patriarchal public space, Lisciane are not only housewives and baby factories. They work in the fields, possess dowries, and their rights to land are respected. There is a difference in inheritance, however. In theory, all women are provided with some local resources, a dowry and some land. Not all men, however, inherit land. Some inherit herds that take them away for months at a time to a very uncertain destiny. This leaves women with a disproportionate responsibility for agriculture. As well, many women were in the past small scale artisans, mostly weavers. However, many male artisans (except for millers) are in fact from outside the community.

In general, then, women's economic status ties them to the community more than the economic position of men, which only serves to underline the paradox of why more women than men marry exogamously. Yet women are not completely independent. During her marriage, the right to control a woman's property passes partially from her father before marriage to her husband. Women only regain full control when they divorce (extremely rare before 1968) or become widows. A husband may not sell or otherwise dispose of his wife's property or income as an artisan, yet he may largely control how she spends her income.

Since the data indicate that many women were also independent property owners, a hypothesis can be advanced: men are relatively disfavoured by the system of

inheritance and favoured by marriage. In brief, they have everything to gain and virtually nothing to lose by marriage. Women, on the other hand, have everything to lose and only rarely something to gain by marriage. Marriage for them represents a relative weakening or at list diluting of their economic and social independence.

It stands to reason that men will be more desperate to marry since it more or less guarantees them a local economic base. Women, however, tend to lose their independence, which is why they hold off as long as possible or seek spouses from outside in richer villages, men who stand to gain relatively little economic advantage from marrying a Lisciana. Hence, delayed marriages and capture marriages, in which the man's so-called punishment is to be forced by other men to marry the woman he has captured.

There remains the original problem, of course, of why kidnapped women are taken to the spot in the valley where the patron saint of Liscia first emerged, apparently from elsewhere and whose arrival was provoked by the actions of a non-Lisciani hunter. But the story of the lamb is not a narrative shared by all but a male story.

There are several themes that seem evident: first, the site where the absconded women are hidden and the presence of the foreign hunter seem to express the same theme of betrayal and exploitation felt by Lisciani men vis a vis outsiders: that they take 'their' women away. In a sense, the outsiders do no such thing, since it is Lisciane women who favour men of their same or better socio-economic class who happen to be outsiders. There is very little evidence of women marrying down the status ladder but much evidence to suggest the opposite. This of course means men marry down but rarely up.

Second, the myth is kept alive by the politics of modernisation. The modernisation plans of the government starting in the 1960s had an explicit aim of integrating the south in a relationship of political and economic dependency on the north. While not the place to examine such policies and their national political agendas, suffice it to say that female emigration has increased as the social status and economic power of women have increased, even though the majority of the female emigrants are now leading substantially the same lives they would have led had they stayed in Liscia: same factory jobs, same educational and work opportunities, same demographic changes, and

so on. In fact, there has not been a capture marriage since the 1960s (admittedly hard to verify).

But modernisation is not merely an analytical strategy. In abruzzo, like almost everywhere else, modernisation has had an immediate impact on women in two ways: improved standards of health care have meant a lowering in infant mortality rates and an increase in post-partum survival rates of women; and improved educational opportunities have allowed women to challenge male domination of the public sphere. In fact, women have eroded the confines of this male space by using new educational opportunities for their children (a female responsibility, after all) to redefine the public sphere of men. What counts more now is not so much male control of traditional resources but new definitions of the public that have emerged as educated children have taken their place in the local administration and play by the new political rules. In a sense the balance of power between men and women has been eroded by modernisation strategies. As more and more men go abroad to work and bring back money to the community, the marriage and status stakes are raised for women and so more and more women leave the community to marry their equals or betters outside the community.

And men continue to tell the story of the Archangel Michel and the procession that enters the community from the outside.