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Male and Female in Kankanay Songs

Norma N. Lua



One of the more compelling voices heard in this age of rapid changes belongs to the feminist movement. That this voice reverberates at this time of social ferment does not come as a surprise to anyone who realizes that, indeed, so much in the institutions which various human cultures put up in support of the human being and his or her group is grounded on the understanding that these cultures have of the differences between the sexes (Mead 1949, 7). This interconnection between the male-female question on the one hand and the cultural and social institutions on the other is the reason why the more impressive spokespersons for feminism call for a basic change in the entire fabric of society and not for mere equalization of rights. Nevertheless, there are those who would argue that the concerns of feminism dwindle into insignificance, if not irrelevance, when viewed against the more pressing problem of basic human survival. This argument betrays a vision which fails to see that gender issues are in fact rooted in the more basic concern for survival. As Margaret Mead observes, survival hinges on the growth of the accuracy with which human beings, female and male, are able to judge what they can and cannot do (Mead 1949).

The realization of this fundamental relationship between gender issues and basic survival is what lies at the core of the current catch phrase—women and development—within whose context debates and studies on feminism in Third World countries are usually encouraged. It appears that some people have finally realized that development, whatever its definition may be, cannot happen without the conscious participation of one-half of any given population, especially since this half is actively involved, to say the least, in the two circumstances that determine the development of any society: production and reproduction.

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This realization has caused the entry into current discourse of various texts on how women, and men, too, particularly those from societies which bear the brunt of development initiatives, perceive themselves, their roles, and their position in society. For as recent studies show, these perceptions are a significant factor "in determining the quality and quantity of change that women experience in the course of development" (Charlton 1984).

This study joins this discussion of gender issues and development through an exploratory inquiry into one cultural text from a Third World society—the traditional song. It has been demonstrated that "the use of literature for the study of the female in history and society is an approach that is valid as any quantification technique," for

literature can present existing social relationships as well as help to socialize women into roles expected of them. To the reader, therefore, literature serves the dual purpose of translator of image and arbiter of society. It can also give us a closer understanding of the individual observer since in literature the writer's "manipulation" of evidence is presumably more arbitrary than the social scientist's. Literature supplies us with the symbols, stereotypes, archetypes, and roles it creates or conjures up which are useful for testing "real" situations (Pescatello 1973).

Through an analysis of the traditional Kankanay songs, I will attempt to abstract traditional Kankanay culture's ideas on malehood and femalehood. More specifically, I will try to answer the following questions:

1. What roles does traditional society assign to each of the sexes? What qualities or attributes do these roles dictate upon the traditional Kankanay man and woman?
2. As perceived by the traditional Kankanay, what similarities, distinctions, and relationships exist between the sexes? How do these relate to the traditional Kankanay's sociocultural context?
3. Do the songs convey dynamism in the traditional Kankanay's perception of what constitutes manhood and womanhood? If dynamism is communicated, what specific expressions does this dynamic perception take?

The traditional songs which are the subject of this study are from the body of Kankanay folksongs collected by Morice Vanoverbergh,

CICM from Bauko in 1912 (Vanoverbergh 1978; 1954). Only those songs which have a bearing on the topic were chosen. These songs (whose numbers in the Vanoverbergh collection are followed in this paper) fall under three types: the *dain* (or *daing*), the *day-en* (or *day-eng*) and the *swinging songs*.

The *dain* songs are used in most public and private sacrifices and also during contests between boys and girls (Vanoverbergh 1954). Its structure is that of a dialogue between a man and a woman, and its mood is teasing.

The *day-en* songs are more universal in use since they are sung on any occasion—by an individual or a group (Vanoverbergh 1954). Most *day-ens* are in narrative form, but a few are dialogues.

As their name indicates, the *swinging songs* "are sung whenever there is swinging," and they are always playful in mood (Vanoverbergh 1954). Some are monologues, others are dialogues between a man and a woman, and most are short verses of jest or praise.

In distilling traditional Kankanay society's conception of the male and female, I will rely on an analysis and interpretation of role descriptions, recurrent metaphors, and plot motifs found in the songs.

In the analysis of sex-role descriptions and metaphors, emphasis will be placed on their cultural contexts. Words, names, objects, and metaphors will not be interpreted in isolation but always in relation to the assumptions and associations which the Kankanays attach to them and which the context of their use itself reveals. This approach is dictated by the fact that words and objects are given what may be called a "spatial quality" in a culture, and it is this quality in space that the word or object possesses which enhances or diminishes the subject upon which these words are predicted (Fernandez 1974).

Plot motifs, on the other hand, will be studied in the light of the pattern they make apparent. This approach is in the tradition of the structural method of folklore analysis wherein repetition is seen to reveal a structure or pattern out of which meaning may be deduced (Levi-Strauss 1963). In turn, the patterns that become visible are taken as "key scenarios" or symbols which articulate goals for the culture and hint at possible pathways toward these goals (Ortner 1979).

The Male in Traditional Kankanay Society

A close examination of the duties which Kankanay society assigns to its male members reveals the different roles assumed by the male in the culture.

Foremost is the role of food provider. It is the man's duty to procure food for his family. Failure to provide adequate food for his family is a cause for censure and personal shame as intimated in one song (dain 22). In this song, the woman obliquely reminds her husband that if she becomes thin, the neighbors would ridicule him for his failure to provide her with adequate nourishment. In another (dain 2) she riles him thus:

I will not eat, husband
 you will be ashamed, husband
 because you did not catch flying locusts.

A second prominent role is that of protector of the family against the enemies, particularly the headhunting ones. One song (dain 12) presents him as a guard, and another (17) has him building a fence around his farm to protect his property from marauders.

The songs also present the Kankanay male as the tamer of nature or the wilderness. It is his duty to adapt the forest or nature to his needs. He chops wood (dain 14), and converts the bamboo into strips for basket-weaving (dain 39). Fence-building may also be seen in the light of Kankanay man's attempt to put some semblance of organization into the natural state of his environs. And tool-making, like forging a crowbar in one song (dain 19), is his manner of exerting his creative power upon natural objects.

Furthermore, the Kankanay man is the one who markets his family's produce and other goods—cloth, blankets, pigs, etc.—and this role brings him to other places (dains 18 and 19).

Linked to the various roles assigned to the male members of the group are the qualities or attributes necessary in the carrying out of these roles.

Possession of wealth, with the social prominence that attends it, is clearly much-valued in a man. Obviously, a wealthy man is a good provider. In some swinging songs (18 and 19) good food is evidence of wealth. So is owning a house and a farm. Having some leisure time is also a sign of wealth and high social standing, for obviously, only a wealthy man can afford to sit idle as intimated in one swinging song (17). So important is wealth that it sits high on the priority scale of a girl looking for a prospective husband. In one song, physical comeliness takes only second place to wealth.

Industry is another quality desirable in a man. Inversely, laziness is ridiculed. Laziness is graphically illustrated in the image of the

sitting man as in "sitting in the meeting place" and "sitting cross-legged" in one swinging song (20). Evidently, industry means being up and about and doing all the things dictated by one's numerous roles.

Physical strength, with the accompanying physical wholeness, is another attribute valued in a Kankanay man. In several songs (daing 34 and 45) strength is the ability to "throw down" a carabao or a horse. As a consequence of this emphasis on physical strength and wholeness, men with physical defects are rejected in courtship as shown in the following song (day-en 44):

There is, they say, Pastakingan, who lives at Otukan,
and is . . . a handsome young man;
Go, they say, to court the girls;
But, they say, the girls say:
Why! Pastakingan,
his feet are lame;
then . . . the girls say,
it would be better for Pastakingan not to exist;
Then they vie with each other pushing him through the door;
Go, go away;
Pastakingan . . . weeps:
I shall give myself to the crocodile for food. . . .

The Kankanay ideal man must also have courage. Courage is apparently linked with man's being the protector and provider. In many songs (e.g. dains 1 and 2) courage is implied in the ability to catch locusts for food because the activity involves a venturing out of the security of farm and community into the world-at-large and possibly into hostile territories. The inability to catch locusts is a sign of weakness and cowardice, as the woman in one song (dain 4) bluntly states.

The Female in Traditional Kankanay Society

The woman is the gardener in the Kankanay society. She sows the field (dain 18), weeds it (dain 11 and 14), and keeps the rats away (dain 15).

She is also a food-gatherer. She harvests the crops and gathers edible snails when her husband brings no provision. She also takes care of food preparation. Thus, one of the things which attracts a man to a woman is the woman's savory cooking (swinging song 15).

The woman is the housekeeper. She launders, does the dishes, and cleans the jars (dain 33 and 44). She also weaves cloth, blankets, and baskets. Her most significant role, however, is that of childbearer. Most of the songs underscore the significance of the woman's childbearing function. And inevitably intertwined with this function is her being the nurturer of children (dain 39).

The aforementioned roles demand the presence of some qualities in the ideal Kankanay woman. Industry is essential for the woman's many jobs in the home and in the fields. A weedless garden is a sign of industry; conversely, one that is full of weeds and infested with rats is a tangible proof of laziness (dains 1, 14 and 15). A woman's industry is also measured by the speed with which she performs her duties (dain 39). Promptness is another sign of industry as implied in one swinging song (23). For the woman, failure to carry out her chores may mean divorce or worse. In one song (day-en 32), for example, the exchange between husband and wife concerning the wife's failure to meet the husband's numerous demands ends tragically:

The man goes to fields,
 the man looks behind . . . ;
 then he says,
 prepare everything
 so that when I come back
 everything is prepared well;
 then . . . he comes back
 and nothing is prepared
 because their child wept all the time;
 then . . . the man says:
 why did you not prepare anything,
 there's little water,
 there is no rice,
 you have not put the pot on the fire;
 then . . . the woman says.
 I could not do anything
 to prepare your food,
 and it is the same concerning your drink;
 and your smoke,
 because I could not leave our child;
 If I go away,
 our child weeps;
 Then the man gets angry . . .
 and he kills his wife . . .

It is because of her numerous chores—more than enough to fill her day—that frequent dancing and singing in sacrifices are frowned upon (dain 26, 36, and 39). Constant presence in sacrifices means neglect of one's duties.

Possession of a healthy body makes a Kankanay woman desirable as made explicit in two songs (dain 10 and 32). In these songs beauty takes the form of nimble feet and eyes which are "as bright as glass." In contrast, ugliness is having legs which "are like twigs" and ankle-bones which "are out of joint," as well as eyes which are "sore" and bleary." Obviously, nimble feet and clear eyes are indispensable in the fulfillment of the various tasks assigned to the female sex like weaving, weeding, and gardening.

Possession of wealth is also considered valuable in a girl; thus, a wealthy girl has better chances of getting married. One song (day-en 66) is quite explicit about what happens to poor girls.

We children of the poor are to be pitied,
nobody faces us
from whom we can get gupangpang-palay,
and that is all then;
we are delayed,
and have nobody to think about,
no one who might be called a husband.

The most valued quality, however, is fertility. A good number of the songs refer to fertility as indispensable to a woman's happiness. The presence of children secures a marriage against breakup as shown in one song (dain 15) where a man states that four children are sufficient to keep him back. Childlessness, on the other hand, is the strongest ground for divorce or abandonment. In one song (day-en 39), for instance, a man divorces his wife of many years in order to have children by another woman. Childlessness is enough cause for public scorn and even physical travails. This much is implied in one song (dain 37):

Woman: Alas, my husband . . .
You began slapping me;
alas, I am wretched,
as if I had no children;
you are slapping me,
and you chide me,
as if I had no children.

The Sexes in Relation to Each Other

Seen in relation to each other, the male and female role definitions in traditional Kankanay culture, as given expression in the songs, reveal complementarity, opposition, and a scale of valuation that favors the male sex.

It is evident from the songs that the genders exhibit complementarity in roles and responsibilities. This quality is shown to issue from the fact that the role definitions for both sexes are grounded on the same basic need—survival. A closer look at the roles reveals that they are reciprocal, as these two dialogues illustrate:

Man: I shall go to have forged
my hoe into a crowbar,
as I shall prepare a field
in a more level place.

Woman: Let it be so,
then I shall sow green gram in it . . .
(Dain 1)

Woman: . . . my husband
take the small cutlass with you,
and cut down the grass,
to fence in the field.

Man: It is done, my wife;
fetch water carefully,
to water the plants.

(Dain 24)

Thus, man prepares the field, and woman sows it; man provides food, and woman prepares it or gathers more; woman weaves cloth and blankets, and man sells them; man builds and secures house and farm, and woman tends both.

It is also this same need to survive which causes the Kankanay society to measure the worth of both man and woman in terms of how able they are to thwart that which threatens the continuity of life for the individual and the group. This threat takes three forms: starvation, enemies, and infertility. Thus man is valued according to his possession of wealth, physical strength, courage, and industry; and woman, according to her ability to bear and nurture children,

alongside her readiness and industry in contributing to the household economy.

This complementarity notwithstanding, the songs disclose an opposition between the male and the female.

For one, an analysis of the spatial direction of the words and objects involved in the Kankanay role descriptions shows that the male roles and functions exhibit an outward thrust. The movement is always one of projection—from the center of the self to the other, and from home and community to foreign territories. And because male tasks (e.g., building a fence, traveling to far distances) are perceived as fraught with such danger that sacrifices are attendant upon their accomplishment, this outward projection carries man even to the outermost reaches of his reality. When he wants to marry, he goes out and searches for a prospective mate. When he looks for food, he goes out of the safe perimeters of home and community. And when he offers sacrifices to the deities, he ventures into the suprahuman realm. His roles and functions bring him into a wider area of action and influence.

While it may be observed that physical contours bear heavily on the metaphors used in the songs for male genitalia, it must also be noted that these metaphors, too, display the aforementioned outward orientation. This is true of the spear which is identified with the male sex in one song (dain 33). In another (dain 45) man's sex organs are a "jar erect."

In contrast to the outward orientation of the male roles and functions, those of the female are grounded on self, home, and field. The childbearing function, which Kankanays perceive as the most important, confines her—and her significance for that matter—within the boundaries of her physical nature in the tradition of "anatomy is destiny." Even in those roles which dovetail with those of the men, the Kankanay woman is kept within home and farm. In procuring food, for example, woman gathers food from the farm (e.g., potatoes, vegetables, edible snails), but man looks for it outside the limits of his property. This notion of transcendence versus groundedness is further illuminated by the type or quality of the relationships which the sexes have with nature and the processes of life and growth.

Man's various roles reveal a stance which combines opposition to, intervention with, and eventual dominance over nature and its processes. For example, when he prepares the farm and builds fences, he attempts to check nature's encroachment upon what he has marked off as his territory. When he cuts bamboos and chops wood, he not

only manipulates nature toward the immediate service of his needs. He also directly intervenes with the natural process of growth, an intervention which reaches its ultimate form when he kills his enemies.

In direct contrast, most of the female roles entail harmony with nature and its processes. Gardening is basically riding with and being sensitive to the various rhythms of nature. This oneness with nature is best concretized in the woman's childbearing role. In childbearing, the woman submits to the natural rhythm of her body. In the performance of her duties, the Kankanay woman is not called upon to exhibit power or dominance over her natural environment. In opposition to man's direct intervention with, to the point of negating, the natural process of growth, woman tends and nurtures it. Hers is a stance of friendly coexistence with, almost a surrender to, nature.

The metaphors which the Kankanay culture applies to the female sex underscore this quality of oneness with nature. Woman is identified with the natural processes of life and growth. In one song (dain 17) woman is "a plant laden with fruit." The woman's natural function of childbearing is effectively caught in the images of beans and peas—two natural objects which contain potential life within them (dains 17 and 18). The use of the water image to suggest the female sex in three songs (dains 44, 46, and 47) may also be related to the significance of water in the process of growth.

It may be concluded, therefore, that the essential difference between the genders in traditional Kankanay culture, as seen in the songs, lies in the relatively transcendental quality of male existence as opposed to the grounded existence of the female. The Kankanay male is forever going beyond the boundaries of self, home, and community. His meaning is defined in terms of his ability to leap over these boundaries. His roles and functions entail creative activity, openness to risk and chance (in the songs only the men are accused of gambling; apparently the women do not gamble), and relative freedom. In contrast, fixity in home, community, and nature (of her body and her environs) characterizes female existence. Her various roles and functions limit her responses to passivity, harmonious coexistence, acceptance, and surrender.

This difference is a source of tension between man and woman in the songs, frequently breeding an exchange of barbed comments. In many songs the exchange starts with the woman's asking the husband about what he did with himself, the goods he was supposed to have sold, or the money he got from these goods, in his excursion. Her imagination becomes rife with pictures of him gambling and

running after girls. The man has a ready answer to or excuse for each question, plausible answers. The wife, given her confinement to home (the man usually tells her to keep to the house while he is away and to place a knotted plant stalk before their yard to signify prohibition of entrance by any other man), has no way of verifying these. Then finally riled by her accusations which strike close to home, the man counterattacks by accusing her of infidelity while he was gone, to which accusation the woman sarcastically retorts:

How unfortunate I am, my husband,
 For came my mother-in-law,
 and sat down
 at the foot of my bed.

(Dain 24)

The Kankanay conception of the sexes gleaned from the songs betrays a scale of valuation which undeniably puts the male in a position superior to that of the female.

One evidence of this perceived superiority of man over woman is the male obsession with role irreversibility. A reversal of roles shames the Kankanay male. There are certain things which only the women must do—washing clothes, doing the dishes, taking care of the children, and preparing food. Man is insulted when asked to do any of these things. In one song (daing 31) the husband threatens to leave when his wife asks him to prepare food. In another (swinging song 3) doing the dishes shames him. A fool-proof method of insulting a man is to tell him that he behaves like a woman (dain 1). The Kankanay woman, on the other hand, delights in a reversal of roles. One song (dain 33) shows the woman reveling in the possibility of her carrying a spear and, therefore, being "like a man."

The superiority of the male sex is further emphasized by the metaphors used for male and female genitalia. Male genitals are euphemistically referred to as "jars," which in Kankanay culture are considered precious (in dain 37 jars may be bartered or sold, and in dain 59 they may be given in lieu of salaries), or "spears," whose value in the culture cannot be disputed. In contrast, the female genitals are referred to as "hyacinth beans," which is also a metaphor for ugliness in two songs (dains 13 and 53).

The superiority of the male is also alluded to in the pattern which surfaces in most dialogues. The dialogues usually begin with man and woman accusing each other of negligence in the performance of

their respective duties. Then the man threatens the woman with divorce or abandonment. When this happens, the woman does one of three things: tells him he cannot leave her because of the children, prods him in wounded pride to leave, saying that she can take care of the children by herself, or backtracks and tells him she is only singing. What is significant in this pattern is that it is the man who is in a position to threaten to leave. All that the woman can say is that, when her husband leaves, then she will be free to dance in another man's sacrificial feast.

The songs do not make explicit the reasons behind this value-scale. If one considers, however, that the major concern of the Kankanays as revealed in their sex-role definitions is survival in a precarious environment, then it may be conjectured that this nature of the physical environment contributes in a decisive manner to the higher estimation accorded the male sex. In this type of environment, brute force is the one essential weapon for survival, and obviously, it is the man who possesses brute force in a greater degree. Although the subject of male superiority in strength, bodily constitution, and endurance is still very much open to debate, the fact is that childbearing, particularly in a primitive environment, weighs down not only on strength and constitution but also on woman's freedom of movement. It may, therefore, be said that in the case of the Kankanay woman, the demands of her primitive environment combined with her childbearing role put her below the Kankanay man in the estimation of her group. Her productive and reproductive roles are constructs that resulted from her group's need to cope with the material conditions of her culture and society.

Dynamism in the Kankanay View of the Sexes

The preceding discussion on the Kankanay conception of the sexes as revealed in their songs shows that this conception of the sexes issues from the communal goal of survival. The Kankanay songs reveal how a group's conception of sexual identities are influenced to a marked degree by the demands which the group places on the sexes in the course of the group's journey toward its desired goal. It has been recognized, however, that although it is ultimately in the interest of the individual or a subgroup to participate harmoniously in society, it is not always in the individual's or the subgroup's interest to participate unconditionally in society's terms, and that, therefore,

human psychic economy will necessitate an indirect expression of emotions or desires which come in conflict with altruistic ones (Fischer 1963). In the case of the Kankanays, the songs become these means.

Among the songs are some which communicate a pattern of rebellion against the groundedness of the female existence.

Three songs convey female negation of motherhood. In one (day-en 66) a mother keeps hurting her son for no apparent reason. In another (day-en 48) a mother disowns her son. In a third (day-en 11) a mother repeatedly throws her baby down the ladder and admits to being insane. The father's response is to offer a sacrifice for the mother to make her well. The classification of the mother's action as "insane" and the father's traditional response make this particular song a textbook case of how a prevailing system labels as mad and therefore null and void certain actions or discourses that, though constrained and controlled, become "a stumbling block, a point of resistance . . . (Foucault 1970). This song, in effect, juxtaposes two discourses: one which is dominant and another which, although expressive of a strong, legitimate desire, can only manifest itself through cracks in the dominant discourse's mold. Several songs may also be interpreted as a disguised protest against female confinement within the boundaries of home and farm under the domination of the husband. In one song (day-en 67) the wife takes the initiative in divorcing her husband and succeeds. In another (day-en 47) a man jails his wife in the house and orders his relatives to watch her. The woman, however, successfully escapes by pretending to buy meat. But it is in the following song (day-en 51) where the feeling of oppression and the sentiment of protest cannot be missed:

Ah! the cotton,
weeding it,
then, it grows up,
then fumbling with it,
then carrying it and bringing it home,
then taking off the cap,
then opening it,
then taking off the hull;
you are to be envied, Gatan,
lying down all the time,
I am to be pitied,
looking at it,
then weaving it,
then finishing it,

then sewing it;
Certainly the carabao
is to be envied who does nothing but graze . . .

Male and Female

Given the tremendous sense of being weighed down by her many tasks as communicated above, one narrative song (day-en 47) may be interpreted as the crystallization of the traditional Kankanay woman's fantasy. Incidentally, it also offers an unflattering picture of the male. In this song, the woman is a star:

then Bikadan lay in ambushade,
and caught one star,
then he skins her,
and puts her skin
in the palay;
then Bangan draws out palay,
and she reaches for her skin,
and Bikadan has not seen it,
and she flew away . . .

These songs, which are decidedly a minority, communicate a goal—the liberation of the Kankanay woman from a limited area in which to become and thus find her worth as a human being and as a member of the group. The songs intimate that the Kankanay woman aspires to assume an existence which goes beyond her physical nature and conventional domain. All these stories picture a rebellion against the entrapment of the female sex within the roles which limit her being to the narrow sphere of her productive and reproductive functions. These songs convey a clear reversal of values. Their existence and their having passed the natural, communal censorship of oral transmission, however, are proof that the sentiments they intimate are shared by the members of the Kankanay society, though in a vague and undefined way perhaps. Taken as key scenarios, these songs communicate a goal not much different from the basic goal of survival but a better, more expanded vision of it. It is the same goal of life—but life which goes beyond the merely physical, which is creative and dynamic, and, most important, which is shared by all members of the group.

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