

WEAVING ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

The aspect of gender in the study and analysis of vernacular architecture has often been overlooked for more popular categories such as methods of construction, motifs and ornamentation. But gender being in itself a social and cultural construct, becomes an essential, even basic notion to which architecture should be studied. It provides yet another contextual framework that will bring understanding to the socio-cultural dynamics and the power relations that inform architecture as a whole.

The study is focused on the weaving communities of the Northern Cordillera tribes of the Philippines as case studies, as it primarily establishes women's status, their economic and cultural role in these indigenous societies. As weaving is an activity closely associated with women, the paper attempts to shed light on the correlation between gender roles and the spatial organization within the domestic setting, and the extent of women's participation and involvement in the decision-making process of building the home and ultimately the community.

A survey among the households in the Cordillera shows how interior spaces in indigenous houses and community spaces in traditional settlements reflect how gender has become a factor in the appropriation of

both private and public spaces.

Introduction

While it is commonly agreed that architecture is a product of society, implications of that have always been taken for granted. More often, architecture and produced space are seen as empty and neutral backgrounds, performing the basic requisites of form and function. Space, however, is neither simply the sum of its three-dimensional parts, or as disengaged as usually perceived. Within its boundaries and planes are contained the complexities of the society that which produces it. It is, by and large, one of the more tangible elaborations of a culture to which it can hold up to itself as a mirror to reflect its values and priorities—the nexus between the abstract and the material world.

At the same time, architecture is also the very locale, the “theatre of action” where society plays out its organization and customs, and where beliefs and taboos are enacted or prohibited^I. Lefebvre, in his seminal work, has as so much described it as one of society’s instruments by which it can moderate and influence both thought and action, and thereby, a means of control^{II}. Yet, even as space conveys a message, it also sets the parameters for its own use and practice.

This is the dynamic inherent in produced space exists wherein there is a constant shifting between being the signified and the signifier. Space inasmuch as it is influenced and affected by its users and inhabitants, is equally affective, and influences behavior. It does so, however, in no overt fashion. Often, the message is hidden in the very forms that make up its boundaries, transforming the space into a symbolic and fetishized representation, expressing

abstractions such as the relations of production and reproduction. Lefebvre notes that this, in effect illustrates the dualistic nature of produced space—that is both to display and displace—the former serving to maintain social cohesion and identity; while the latter, effectively concealing them^{III}.

The symbolic transmutation of a culture’s reproductive relations by way of creating sexual representations that of the male and female^{IV} constitutes a society’s concept of gender and invariably, establishes a specific ideology and codifies the practices allowed within the space.

Modern architecture, for one, has been readily accused of putting at a premium a patriarchal ideology—from form to practice, it reflects a phallogentric ideal and institutes masculine hegemony. Even the usage of surface ornamentation, previously thought of as a matter reflective of taste and social class, is nevertheless gendered and carries strong associations with the female. They are attractive but intellectually undemanding—incidental additions and afterthoughts to bare structures and buildings—very much what is believed women are to men. The lack of it, as many modernist architects have put forth, alludes to integrity, honesty, and permanence—the very traits attributed to men^V.

The masculinization of architecture, such as seen in modern society, extends beyond the usage of lines and geometry, material selection, ornamentation or the lack thereof. They are corollaries to culturally prescribed and accepted masculine (or feminine) attributes. Architecture, for all intents and purposes, is the site of a discourse on gender, politics and power.

Gender and Vernacular Architecture

Traditional cultures, however, is far from removed from all these. In fact, the concept of gender and gender relations is putatively more ingrained in the construction and design of traditional architecture. Because it is not rooted in any formal theory of design, traditional or folk architecture relies on intuition, common sense, worldview and communal memory just as heavily as it does on practical considerations such as use and function, climate and topography, technology and available building materials to shape the built environment^{VI}. Gender becomes more than an abstract concept or a matter of differentiation between the sexes. It becomes an ordering principle^{VII}.

In certain societies, direction and orientation are even equated to gender as a way to create social mapping and recreate the dichotomies present in nature. In 1909, Robert Hertz in his book, "The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand", wrote:

Society and the whole universe has a side which is sacred, noble and precious, and another which is profane and common; a male side, strong and active, and another, female, weak and passive; or in two words, a right side and a left side...^{VIII}

This type of mapping has led to the consequent appropriation and relegation of spaces within the domestic and private spheres that are gender-specific, finding justification on arbitrarily pegged, yet culturally pervasive beliefs on gender roles. Victorian literature on housing and design gives a clear example of this: drawing rooms were closely associated with the feminine domain, while the dining

room, whose décor was more august and dignified was decidedly male^{IX}. Similarly, in traditional Arab homes, spaces take on far stricter zoning measures. In a study on Muslim Middle Eastern and North African homes, the concept of "seclusion and segregation" is used to identify the female sphere versus that of the male. Cultural prohibitions and constraints promote this type of zoning to great effect through the use of both mental and physical barriers^X. The extent of how society ultimately appropriates spaces based on gender is in no way limited within the private realm. Although distinct from the public sphere, appropriation of spaces within the private sphere will have corresponding repercussions outside it. Women are equated with the home, domesticity and the private sphere just as men are equated with the workplace and the public sphere. Moreover, the roles of men and women in actual design and building of homes within the context of vernacular tradition are defined and demarcated. Although variable from one society to the next, what is not is how each of the sexes' involvement and decision-making power in building and construction will find a way into spatial expression and affect the "domestic routines of living"^{XI}. Seeing how gender is inextricably embedded in the study of space and architecture, this paper aims to examine how gender relations have shaped the architecture of the Cordilleras and how it informs its socio-spatial use. More than that, the study further ties in women's roles as weavers and homemakers, and explores how their cultural and economic roles and status influence the extent of involvement in the decision-making process of home building and ultimately, the community.

Weaving, Gender Roles and the Ifugao

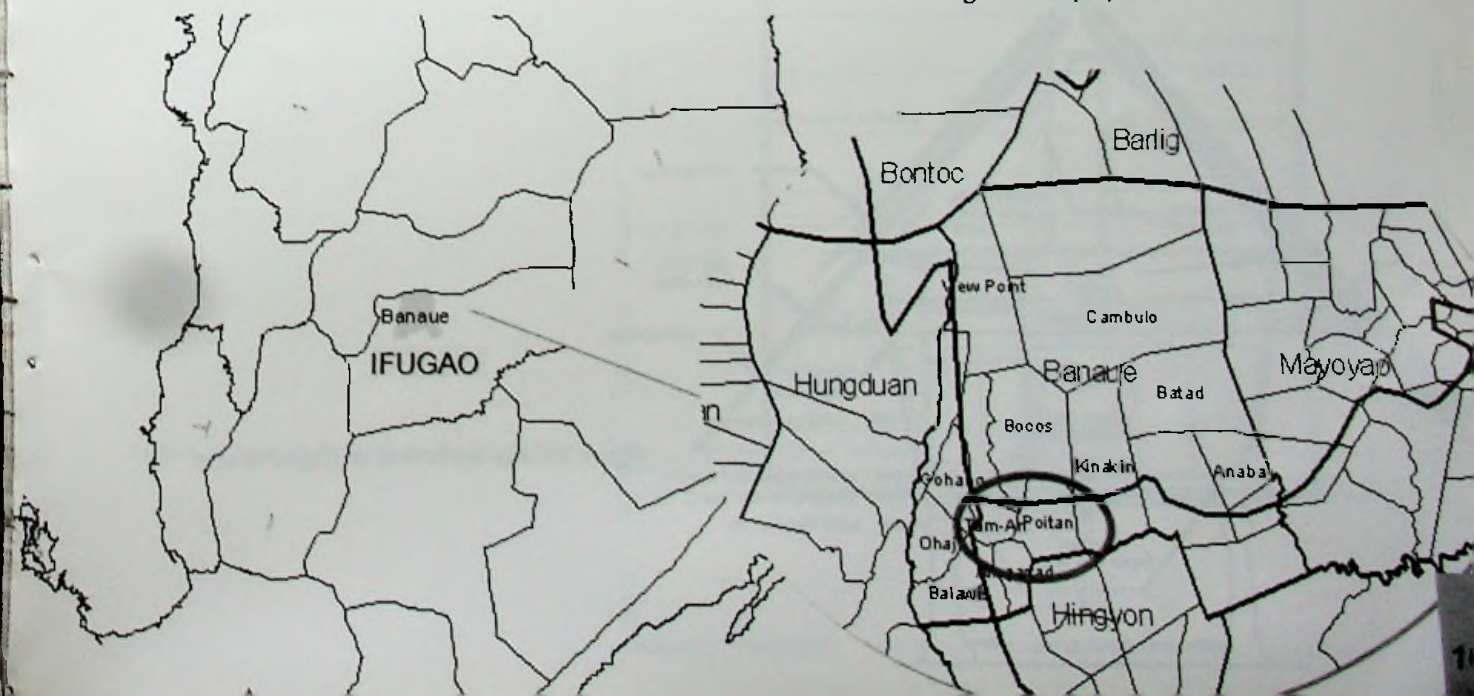
The study focuses on the Ifugao, one of eleven indigenous communities living high in the Gran Cordillera Mountains, in the Northern Philippines. We visited traditional settlements in the Poitan and Tam-nan areas within the municipality of Banaue (See Figure 1). Many of the points discussed and articulated in this article are derived insights from our observations of physical and environmental situations of surviving traditional architecture and settlement in the areas as well as from interviews of users and inhabitants. The study takes on a qualitative and descriptive approach integrating ethnographic data with the spatial analysis.

The Ifugao, like many of the Cordillera settlers generally live off the land, subsisting on agriculture, mainly wet-rice cultivation and at certain times of the year by swidden farming of various vegetable and root crops^{XII}. Secondary to agriculture, the raising of livestock and poultry is also undertaken, mostly by women, and both sexes engage in artisanal

industries. Certain distinctions are drawn, however. Men are usually associated with woodcarving and sometimes, of weaving utilitarian baskets. Women, on the other hand, are solely responsible for fabric production. Ifugao fabrics, which are sold in the lowlands and to local and regional tourists, complement agricultural activities and augment to the family income. But there is more to Ifugao fabric production than economics, as there is a strong cultural component that goes along with it.

Why weaving has been relegated as women's labor has been linked to representations of women's fertility and life-giving power, with the process even likened to that of birthing^{XIII}. This further validates anthropological studies made linking Ifugao women, rice cultivation, fertility and textiles. For the Ifugao, the weaving process is even deified, with certain deities associated with different aspects of fabric production. Moreover, textiles are seen as prized commodity among the community folk of the Ifugao and are commonly used in ceremonial exchanges^{XIV}.

Figure 1: Map of Poitan and Tam-nan Areas



As a task overseen by women, the tradition of weaving has been carried and passed on to generations of Ifugao women, and are usually performed in their respective households. Even then, weaving as a home industry has slowly changed over the years, and communities have begun to build weaving cooperatives to enable women weavers to better pool resources and income.

Weaving also brings an altogether different social aspect to women: it facilitates social mobility, as it allows women to move through different spheres of activity that are easily afforded to Ifugao men^{XV}.

There is a consensus among studies made, and even in the households we surveyed that the Ifugao are largely an egalitarian society with men and women actively participating in economic opportunities. Ifugao women enjoy a high degree of equality—they can inherit and own land and property equally as men and exercise joint authority with their husbands at home. Still, it is the women who undertake the bulk of household responsibilities, from child rearing, cooking, washing clothes to managing the finances^{XVI}.

It is, on the other hand, the role of the men to

help in cultivating the terraces, repair of walls, plant in the swidden lands, and collect wood. They have more leisure time and sometimes help with the chores, go hunting and fishing, or gambling in their free time. It is also the men's responsibility to ensure the safety of his family and the village^{XVII}.

Ifugao Architecture and Settlement: A Gendered Perspective

The Ifugao house, or the bale, is considered as one of the most prized ingenious folk architecture in the Philippines. It is traditionally constructed using hard woods, raised on wooden stilts, with a square modular plan and a basic dimension of two to four meters; and a pyramidal roof traditionally made with cogon grass.

Perez, in his book, Folk Architecture, describes the bale to a woman's figure wearing the tudung, a raincape commonly worn by women; with the ladder being compared to a pair of

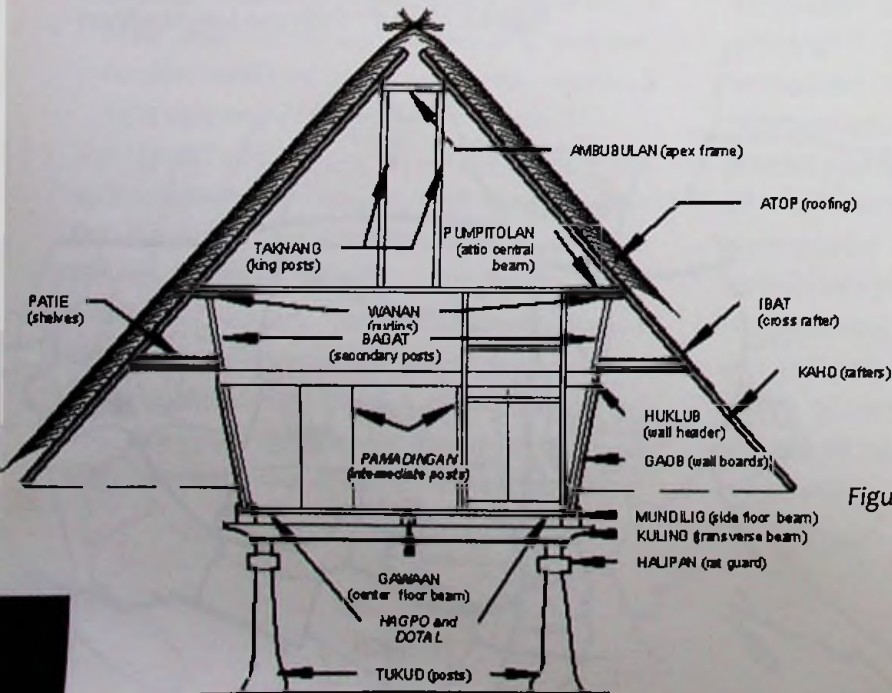


Figure 2: Cross Section of an Ifugao House

stretched legs. From an anatomical perspective, the house becomes the belly or the torso^{XVIII}.

There are essentially three levels to the Ifugao house: the ground floor, or the chola; the bale, or house cage; and the palan, or the granary. (Fig.2) The chola, is an open, multi-functional space found below the house serving as ritual space, storage, and weaving area for the women in the family.

The interior of the bale is a one-room affair, where all activities are performed. (Fig.3) There are no demarcations or boundaries within, except for the pamalakngan, or the hearth. Patie or shelves are constructed on the eaves, projecting outwardly of the house cage. They are used to store items such as utensils, food, and weaving products. A special shelf, called palatang, is added to hold the remains of their ancestors.

There are no windows, and a single door provides sole access to the house through a

four-tiered ladder. In some of the houses visited, there may be a back door present but usually remains closed. Access is limited as the ladder remains fixed at the front. Without any other openings in the house, and blackened by the soot from the hearth, the interior is kept naturally dark.

Using architecture as metaphor for the body, the configuration of the bale is significant and telling. As doors and windows are symbolic of bodily orifices^{XIX}, the absence or lack of openings, and the darkness that envelope the interior of the house is quite suggestive of the womb^{XX}. Almost in a literal sense, the house is a woman, and the woman, a house.

Yet on another level, the lack of openings in the bale can be regarded as a way to limit the visibility of the woman inside the house. With a number of domestic activities being performed inside, so is the woman kept out of sight and away from the masculine gaze^{XXI}.

It is also interesting to note that despite no

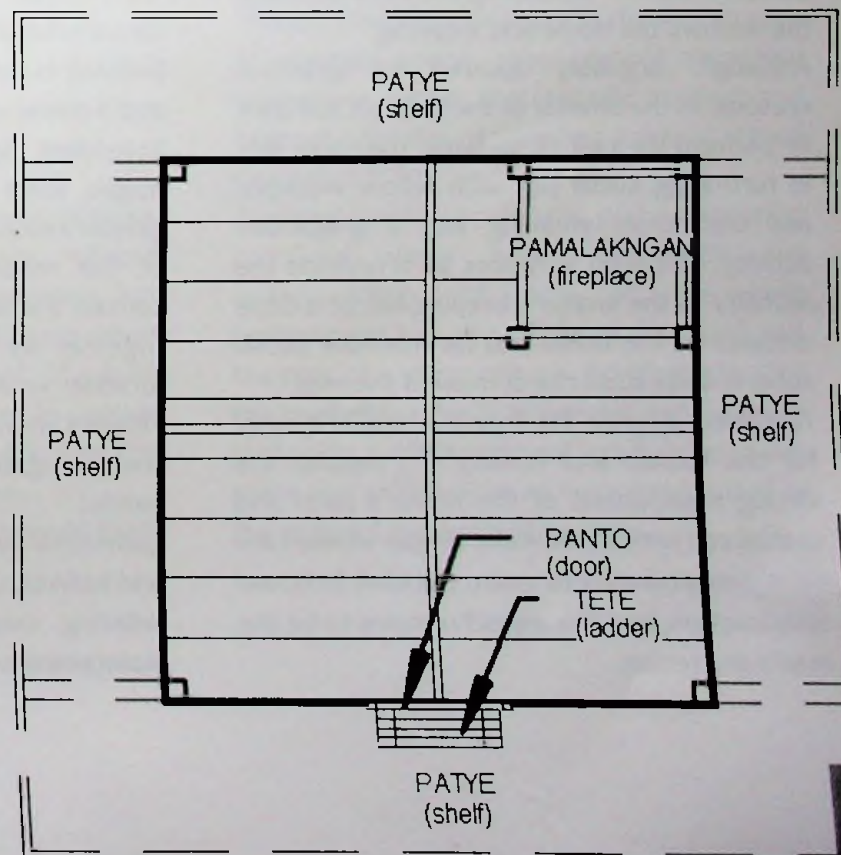


Figure 3: Typical Plan of an Ifugao house

physical boundaries present inside the bale, an invisible zoning occurs. The left side is usually associated with the male, and referred to as *nundatu*, which means continuing, while the right side, and incidentally is adjacent to the kitchen or hearth is female, or *na-ulya*, meaning lacking, because it is shorter. Sleeping positions are influenced by this, as men and women take their respective sides. In certain rituals, as Perez notes, the husband's relatives will sit on the male's side, and the wife's relatives taking the right^{XXII}.

Another area, which may be considered as part of the female sphere is the *chola*. This multi-functional space, which serves as the weaving area, seems to both literally and figuratively anchor the women to the house. The preferred weaving implement is the backstrap loom, which requires the weaver to strap the loom to herself and to hook it on a fixed part of the house—in this case, the massive posts that support it and mark the four corners—further solidifying the links between the woman, the home and weaving.

Although, arguably spurred by practical reasons, as the interior of the house is too dark to perform the task of weaving, the *chola* aids in furthering social ties with fellow weavers, and transforms weaving into a gregarious activity. But even as it does so, it restricts the mobility of the woman, keeping her at a close distance to the home and far from the public sphere, away from the domain of the men.

To a great degree, the bale is a sexual symbol for the female and fertility^{XXIII}. Despite the strong associations of the house's form and spatial use with the female, Ifugao women are hardly empowered to make decision in house construction, and this aspect remains to be the man's discretion.

Even in cases of unmarried women, where sole ownership of the house is guaranteed, male relatives undertake the responsibility of house design and construction, and the woman's role is diminished and devoted to serving the menfolk food and refreshments during construction period.

Quite compelling too is the apparent lack of ornamentation on most Ifugao homes. While one expects for the women to participate in this aspect of home designing, the little ornamentation present were carved into the very structure, which by virtue of being an artisanal craft, therefore falls within the purview of the male.

In Ifugao mythology, the Ifugao house figures in the creation myth as setting for the incestuous repopulation of the earth between the deity *Kabigat* and his sister, *Bugan*^{XXIV}. There are different retellings of the story, but in all the versions, the brother, the male representation, builds the house for his sister, the female representation, before having carnal relations with her. It is almost as if house building is both a gift of the men to women, and a divine imperative on the part of the male. Extending beyond domestic architecture, Ifugao town planning is likewise shaped by gender relations. Hamlets, built along the face of the mountains or among the terraces, contain a small number of households bound together by extended kinship. Inasmuch as location is marked by its proximity to the village's source of subsistence, it is also within the prerogative of the male kin to locate the hamlet.

Communal areas focused on weaving are far and between, save for a few newly established weaving cooperative centers, thus largely maintaining weaving within the domestic and

private domain and excluding it from mainstream economic activities.

The presence of dormitories, or *agamang*, is also one of the notable features in Ifugao settlements. Built for the unmarried youth of the Ifugao, and one for each of the sexes, children of puberty age are sent to live there and away from the nuclear family home. Observance of certain customs, such as courtship, is centered on these dormitories. But another of the *agamang*'s important function is that it becomes the training ground for young men and women to learn and perform gender-appropriate tasks^{XXV}.

With the exclusion of the children from the premises of the *bale*, the house remains to be the exclusive territory of the married couple, the symbol of conjugal union, and as gleaned from literature and actual practice, the domination and appropriation of female sexuality.

Conclusion and Discussions

The playing out of sexual identity and relations is as compulsory as it is automatic, without much thought as to the hows and whys, but always coming within the culturally prescribed and accepted rules of engagement. The built environment is a ready stage in which gendered relations and actions are enacted and established over and over again.

In the case of the Ifugao, gender reveals itself

to be an underlying influence that imposes on both form and spatial practice. The house is found analogous to the female body and inevitably fetishized. Private spaces are appropriated in the same manner as the female body has been appropriated, and extends well into the fabric of Ifugao settlements.

The status of Ifugao women as individuals and agents of culture, are considered by many as equal to that of men. However, this status has yet to impinge itself on gendered divisions of labor, and how it impacts spatial practice in the Ifugao house and community.

It is not so much a question whether the women are given power and influence, but to what extent it is given. The decision-making power concerning house building is by far limited, challenging the notions of egalitarianism in Ifugao society^{XXVI}. Such discrepancy from what is commonly held to be true by a society and what is in actuality may actually stem from this simple truth: a loss of objectivity.

This is the reality that arises in the fetishization of abstract space: users cannot recognize themselves within that specific context and "cannot conceive of adopting a critical stance towards it."^{XXVII}

Applying gender concepts as part of analyzing produced space helps to enrich our understanding not only of the built environment but also of the organization and the crux of a given culture. Bringing into fore the invaluable roles that women and men play in shaping our environment can help us to see space and architecture as mere translations of the abstract but a site of lived life.

End notes

^I Ardener, S., 2006, *The Partition of Space, Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader*, Wiley-Academy (London) p.16

^{II} Lefebvre, H., 1981. *Production of Space*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1991, p.26

^{III} *ibid.*, p. 32

^{IV} *ibid.*, p.32

^V Lico, G., 2001 'Architecture and sexuality: the politics of gendered space', *Humanities Diliman*, 2(1), pp. 35-35

^{VI} Perez, R., et.al., 1989 *Folk Architecture*, Quezon City: GCF Books, p.8

^{VII} Ardener, S. 2006. 'The Partition of Space', *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader*, London: Wiley-Academy, p.19

^{VIII} Hertz, R. (1909) quoted in Ardener, S. 2006. 'The Partition of Space', *Intimus: Interior Design Theory Reader*, London: Wiley-Academy, p.19

^{IX} Eastlake, C.L., 1868. *Hints on household taste in furniture, upholstery and other details*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., pp.63-6

^X Farah, E.A., et.al., 2001. *Gender zones in the Arab Muslim house*. *Proceedings, 3rd international space syntax symposium*, Atlanta, May 2001, p.2

^{XI} Oliver, P., 2006. *Built to meet needs: cultural issues in vernacular architecture*. Oxford: Elsevier, Ltd., p.61

^{XII} De Villa, J.G., et.al., 1988 *E Masferré: people of the Philippine Cordillera*. Makati: Devcon IP, p.44

^{XIII} Ilcan, Suzan, et.al (eds.), 1998. *Transgressing borders: critical perspectives on gender, household and culture*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey. p.173. The dyeing of cloths in the weaving communities of the East Sumba is considered symbolic of the birthing process

^{XIV} *ibid*, p.173

^{XV} *ibid*, p.170. That weaving is almost entirely home-based brings to light the gendered aspect of household work, as well as the clear demarcation of the home as what constitutes the female sphere

^{XVI} Gender roles are based on cultural beliefs and the perceived strength and weaknesses of the sexes. For instance, child rearing are designated to women because of the mother's perceived nurturing nature, and hunting is designated to men due to perceived bravery. Social class distinction, and ancestral status are also apparent determinants of community's social structure. Ember and Ember notes that the role of men in the community is more active than the women. Men served as religious and political leaders while the women were more concerned with household management and the upkeep of agricultural fields. In baki, the traditional Ifugao religion,

men serves as mumbaki or priest and perform the narration of myths, recitation of the name of gods, and religious rituals, offerings to god, and ancestor worship. Women can also be priest or mama-o but their roles are limited compared to that of mumbaki. Baki is a belief system that spouses polytheism, mythology, magic and animism

^{XVII} op. cit., p.85

^{XVIII} Perez, R., et.al., 1989 Folk Architecture, Quezon City: GCF Books, p.69

^{XIX} Hilus, H., 2000. Architecture as metaphor for the body: the case of female convents in early modern Italy. Gender and architecture. England: Wiley. The concept of using architecture as metaphor for body has been espoused by many feminist writers and scholars. However, as early as 1st century BC, Vitruvius has made comparisons to the Classical Orders—the Doric, Ionic and Corinthian to the male and female bodies. Although the Ifugao themselves may not necessarily describe the bale in these terms, the researchers have taken a feminist and gendered approach to explain the form and spatial use of the Ifugao bale

^{XX} ibid, p.78.

^{XXI} Foucault posits that existing within the power relations, the gaze is a mechanism by which power is expressed. There is an inherent question as to who gazes upon who, and in effect, who in that equation has the power? The keeping of women out of the gaze of men would then suggest that men would have the power of the gaze, and the means to control how women behave and the environmental conditions where they could be gazed upon. Likewise, in Hilus' study of architecture of female convents, she relates Renaissance text that considers the female gaze as dangerous and should therefore be avoided by men. This belief in the danger that the female gaze poses has been used as justification to cloister women in these convents.

^{XXII} Perez, p.69

^{XXIII} ibid, p.80

^{XIV} In other versions found within the Ifugao tradition and surrounding communities, the creation myth tells the incestuous relations between a mortal man, Wigan, and his sister, Bagan to repopulate the earth after a great flood. This creates a strong link between sexuality, specifically female sexuality, and house building..

^{XXV} De Villa, J.G., et.al., 1988. E Masferré: people of the Philippine Cordillera. Makati: Devcon IP, p.84. It is also curious that inasmuch as as the Ifugao people condone the incestuous relations between Kabigat and Bagan, as previously mentioned, they acknowledge the taboo surrounding it, and may to certain degree influenced the way the community is planned, and thus giving way to the creation of the agamang.

During the day the children return to the house of their parents to help them with their tasks. Boys were trained masculine things such as hunting, and basket weaving. Girls are on the other hand taught house chores, weaving, and helped in taking care of the young. The perpetuation of gender

roles are therefore very defined as it is passed on from one generation to the other.

^{XXVI} Oakley, A., 1974 *The sociology of housework*. Bath: The Pitman Press. p.10. Women enjoy what is known as "reflected status", one that is afforded to them by association with their husband or a male figure.

^{XXVII} Lefebvre, H., 1981. *Production of Space*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p.93. See also Bordieu's concept of habitus

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