

Rural Women's Reproductive Tasks: The Role of Impression Management in A Ugandan Community

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Abstract: This article focuses on how women's tasks in the household are shaped by the desire to manage the impressions and images they portray to 'others'. It is based on Goffman's perceptions of social life as a theatre in which people present their actions depending on a given definition of the situation. We look at how women's child bearing and rearing related tasks are shaped and influenced by the necessity to manage the impressions they make to 'others' in their communities. Research was conducted in Western Uganda in 2000 using ethnographic techniques.

Key words: Women, household, role, impression management

INTRODUCTION

Human interaction is an inevitable part of social life. The process of interaction is always characterised by certain social expectations that individuals are bound to conform to. Such expectations imply that people are concerned about the impressions they give and the images (of themselves) they portray to others. In this paper, we assume that everybody in the presence of others will be concerned about how others think and react to their behaviour. Clearly, the 'others' are not of one kind-they are different. For example, our sisters and brothers, our mothers and fathers, our female peer group, our male peer group, our spouses/partners, our children, etc. Certainly, our concerns about the impressions these others get from our behaviours differ. Whatever we do says something about our personality. It is this information, which allows them to make assessments about our personal characters and to anticipate how we shall behave in different circumstances. This will affect how they are likely to behave in relation to us. Since this behaviour can have more or less positive or negative consequences for us, we always try to manage the impressions they form of us. We try to present ourselves in a way, which projects a certain image. It is such perspectives that are the basis of Goffman's^[1-3] use of the theatre metaphor for the study of social life. Let us look at social life the same way as we look at actors on the stage. That is, as people projecting certain characters (the characters in the play) by acting (playing roles) in ways, that are convincing for fostering an impression among others (the audience), which impression makes them believe in the character projected. We think Goffman is

right that much of social life is characterised by such considerations. In real social life we are however more sceptical about taking for granted the image others give. We try to search for information that can indicate something about the 'truth' of what we project. This we do by searching for knowledge about each other from a variety of sources. Most importantly we search for knowledge from aspects of people's behaviour that are not so easy to control such as the non-verbal forms of communication like the look in one's eyes and body language. Such aspects of behaviour are not so easy to manage and people may inadvertently give off information which is inconsistent with the information they try to give. According to Håland^[4], "the life 'worlds' in which people participate are thus shaped by both the particular cultural constructions of 'reality' in terms of which they interpret the 'world' and act in it".

If we look at behaviour as something similar to role-play and if we want to understand it from that perspective, we have to look at the actors in relation to other people with whom they play their role. In social life, this is very tricky because the way one acts is also constrained by considerations about the opinion formed by spectators (the audience). Thus the image a man in his role-play projects of his character vis a vis his buddies in the bar, might be rather different from the image which is communicated in his role-play vis a vis his wife at home. The problem with such discrepant images is that information from role-play in one setting may filter through to interaction partners in other settings.

In this study, we try to explore how cultural factors affect the way women try to manage their life their life in a subsistence farming community in western Uganda.

Understanding of such management has to be based on some kind of perception of dichotomisation of gender identities and the way this affects both the statuses women are supposed to occupy and the cultural standards people apply when they evaluate their role performance in various statuses. Female identity in the community that was studied is closely tied to the domestic sector, rights and duties vis a vis other alters (husband, children, in-laws). An important aspect of a woman's position in this sector is her duty to perform a range of activities related to the hearth-cooking, collecting firewood and collecting water. This article focuses on how women's tasks and role performances in the household are shaped by the desire to manage the impressions and images they portray to 'others'. This is mainly because of their social group membership. According to Goffman^[1], social group membership implies culturally defined expectations of behaviour and values. We argue that such expectations of behaviour and values are partly met through role-taking. And that in the process of role-taking, impressions are formed and managed. People do not only form impressions of others but also manage their impressions simultaneously. Impression management aims at portraying a particular identity in order to obtain particular outcomes in an interaction. Our argument is that the roles and tasks women perform in the household are influenced by the desire to manage the impressions they give to other members of their communities.

Research was carried out among a group of Nyankole subsistence peasants in Karama parish, Rugando sub-county of rural Mbarara in western Uganda. Generally a good proportion of the Nyankole population still think of themselves as being divided into two categories—a majority of Bairu associated with cultivation and a minority of Hima associated with animal husbandry, more or less similar to the relation among the Tutsi and Hutu in Rwanda and Burundi. Today however, the divisions between the two categories are not as clear as they used to be. The people of Mbarara specifically the study area are largely Bairu. The data were collected over a period of six months of intense ethnographic fieldwork. In addition to participant observation, 120 in-depth interviews and 25 oral histories that also became family case studies were carried out.

Description of women's statuses and tasks: In describing women's statuses and tasks, we look at how women are constructed as social persons in rural Mbarara. Every Nyankole woman in her life goes through a sequence of statuses connecting her to a range of other people occupying reciprocal statuses. For example as a girl she has obligations to perform various tasks in relationship to

her parents and she has rights in relationship to them e.g. protection and provision of requirements including food. When the girl gets married, she acquires a new status i.e. as a wife. This connects her to another person in a special relationship (her husband), establishing a social unit in the community—the family—and linking such units in a ramifying network of rights and duties with reference to performance of a wide variety of tasks (economic, reproductive, socialisation, political, etc.). In this paper we explain some of the tasks undertaken by women in the study area and show how role-taking is influenced by impression management.

It is quite difficult to categorise women's roles and work/activities/tasks into domestic versus agricultural or reproductive versus productive. This is mainly because first, crop production for family consumption involves reproductive work. Second, women perform both 'productive' and 'reproductive' tasks simultaneously. For example collection of firewood in Karama is often done by women while working in the fields or immediately there after and carried home after completing the day's work. Other than that, women sometimes go with water containers to enable them carry it home on their way from the garden to save time and energy. Many mothers of young children attend to them and feed them while working in their gardens. Others prepare and serve meals (particularly lunch) to their families in the garden. The above examples show how difficult it is to properly demarcate household tasks from agricultural ones.

Nevertheless, we try to explain the factors that shape women's statuses, concerns, tasks and role performance in Karama as a specific 'life-world'. Mosar^[5], categorised women's tasks into reproductive, productive or economic and community functions. In reproductive functions, account is taken of all child bearing and rearing tasks including the crucial function of socialisation. In productive or economic functions, tasks included are those undertaken in agriculture and other economic production. Community functions include all the tasks undertaken to serve the social and political functions of the society. This study is concerned with women's reproductive functions in the household. We regard women's tasks as functions performed in the society. We argue that in trying to fulfil their reproductive functions in the household, women are always controlled by the desire to manage the impressions they give as status holders because culture dictates so.

Women's reproductive functions (in the household unit): There seems to be no universally accepted definition for the term 'household'. This is because its meaning rather overlaps with that of others like 'the family' and 'the

domestic sphere'. According to Moore^[6], "... in much anthropological literature, 'household' is a term used to refer to the basic unit of society involved in production, reproduction, consumption and socialisation" (p. 54). Certainly, women's reproductive activities mainly entail those performed in the household unit and they stem from the major task of child bearing which is a natural requirement for the endurance of the community. In his *Maidens, meal and money*, Meillassoux^[7] explained the features of the domestic communities. He pointed out that their main preoccupation is reproduction because their institutions are organised to this purpose. He contended that all kinship relations resulting from marriage are formed around reproduction of individuals and that, three main factors; food, seeds and women determine social reproduction, as the major concern of these communities.

Likewise, the study revealed that women's reproductive functions are fulfilled in kinship and marriage through the statuses of daughter, wife, mother, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law, grandmother, etc. Like in other parts of the world, all kinship relations and marriages become significant as a result of the multiplication of members through child bearing, as a natural function essentially undertaken by women. Marriage is therefore crucial in all societies because it is where women execute their reproductive functions. Women upon marriage become wives or spouses and child bearers who are eventually transformed into mothers. Occupation of these statuses enables them to form and strengthen links between their families of orientation (where they were raised) and procreation (those of their husbands). In addition to producing the children, women in Karama nurture them from infancy to adulthood. This includes looking after them in various ways including breast-feeding, bathing them, cooking and serving food and drink to them. For children who go to school, it is the responsibility of the mother to prepare these children for school. For example, they provide the children's school requirements, ensure that they are clean, wash their clothes and pack food for them. Child care roles performed by women are influenced by women's need to manage the impressions they give because child care is not only culturally a women's responsibility but also naturally. Several women explained to me how their school going children badly comment about the mothers of children who go to school dirty or with dirty clothes for example.

The majority of the informants pointed out that the main task of women regarding children is their socialisation. One of the Nyankole proverbs properly describes this situation i.e., "omwaana mubi ajumisa nyina" (a 'bad' child shows the behaviour of its mother). This is because, poor behaviour of a child reflects badly

on the mother since it is her responsibility to ensure proper demeanour. Goffman^[3] defined 'demeanour' as "that element of the individual's ceremonial behaviour typically conveyed through deportment, dress and bearing, which serves to explain to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities". According to him, a well-demeaned individual possesses attributes properly associated with 'character training' or 'socialisation'. He believes that demeanour also involves attributes derived from the interpretations, which others make of the way the individual handles himself during social intercourse (p. 489).

It was observed that children in Karama spend more time with the mother than other people. If a child's behaviour is unappealing according to other people's interpretations, then it is assumed that such behaviour is an imitation of what the mother depicts. For example, a child who portrays undesirable behaviour at school prompts the school authorities to demand to see the parents. One respondent explained the trouble she went through when her daughter got pregnant. Her husband expelled the girl from the home and she had to take her to stay with her grand mother. The grand mother supported the girl's father by the Nyankole saying "omwishiki atwiire eyendaaro bamufumuza orugo" (a pregnant girl is never allowed to stay at her father's home). It was considered the mother's responsibility to raise the daughter properly that is why she had to look for an alternative home for her. It seems that the husband acted in this way because he was scared of the other people's interpretations of the situation. He was trying to manage the impressions of the rest of his village mates regarding the situation because it implies failure on the part of his wife to properly bring up the daughter. A good girl who is properly raised should be a virgin among other qualities. If a girl gets pregnant, it brings a lot of humiliation to her family because it is shameful. It even reflects badly on the entire village as manifested in the proverb "omwishiki ku atwara ajumisa omugomgo gwoona" (a pregnant girl in the village exposes the behaviour of all the rest). In other words a pregnant girl projects a bad image on the other girls in the village not to mention herself and her family.

Although it is apparent that socialisation takes place through other agents like the media, schools and peers, it is also important to point out that the family has a basic influence upon the demeanour of most children. Evans-Pritchard^[8] noted that in most tribal societies, the girl comes under the almost exclusive control of her mother thereby associating continuously with a married woman, where as her father focuses his attention on his growing

sons. This is certainly not necessarily the case in the study area. What commonly happens is that when children are still young it is possible to socialise both boys and girls the same way. As they grow older, this becomes more difficult because most boys change and no longer want to 'listen' to their mothers. They are socialised into the patriarchal tendencies and 'beliefs' about masculinity. This is attributed to the influence of peers and other agents of socialisation particularly the media and the school. It was found out that such a change begins at adolescence but it has a great impact on the behaviour of such boys even when they transform into men. Most girls on the other hand continue to listen to their mothers throughout their lives because they go through the same life experiences.

Apart from taking care of the children, women also look after their husbands because this is considered the main way of showing respect to their husbands. Women revealed that respect for a husband is illustrated through caring for them. This is demonstrated in cleaning their clothes and other personal belongings like shoes, providing meals for them in time, ensuring that they have water for bathing, keeping the bedroom clean and tidy, etc. One of the male respondents asked me a question in form of a proverb when I tried to inquire from him the concepts that describe a good woman/wife ie "omukazi otatiina iba ashwereerwa ki?" (Why should a man marry a disrespectful woman?). The question was asked to imply that a good woman must respect her husband or simply that one of the reasons why men get wives is to be respected. Many women said that respecting a man is doing what they want and it is the main way of keeping a marriage and hence remaining with the children. From this statement, we deduced that the primary concern for a woman in marriage is the welfare of their children. Interaction with the traditional healer in the community revealed that many of the women's problems stem from the desire to promote success of their children (through inheritance, education, good health etc.). One of the best ways of doing this is to be successful in marriage through respecting the husband by caring for them. With a successful marriage based on respect for husband, women are able to raise their children in the normal way thereby guaranteeing reproduction and maintenance of current and future labour force. Respect for husband is one of the ideas that are culturally constructed if we agree with Goodenough's^[9] view of culture. That is; culture is what people have in their minds that makes them behave in acceptable ways. For women, it makes them behave in ways acceptable to their husbands. This helps them in maintaining ties with their children. However, it seems that some men just want more than respect of one wife.

Preparation of food is another major task entirely undertaken by women and sometimes together with their daughters. It is incontestable that food is one of the essential necessities of life. Women facilitate life through its provision as an important reproductive function particularly relevant in the domestic sphere. Food preparation involves other tasks like collecting the food from the garden, collecting firewood, peeling, pounding, grinding, collecting water, cleaning the utensils, etc. It takes a lot of the woman's time and energy to get a meal ready. To make the food ready for cooking alone involves the above. Cooking begins by making a fire over which the food is cooked. It is the woman's responsibility to make sure that the fire keeps burning by adding firewood from time to time. If the fire goes out she has to rekindle it by blowing and this continues up until the food is ready for serving. In preparing food, the task of fetching water is extremely essential because water is one of the core ingredients. All households in the study area get water from sources outside the home. Women are usually in dire need for water to execute their duties so they have to collect it by fetching it into containers, which are carried on their heads to transport it home. It should be pointed out that by preparation I mean the process that begins with collecting food from the garden (as is the case for matooke and sweet potatoes) and further processing it through cooking. The research findings show that women whose households lack food are less respected in their communities compared to those whose households are food secure. They give the impression of being lazy rather than poor. Such impressions might be held by people within the household itself (e.g., spouse and in-laws) as well as neighbours.

Other household tasks performed by women include caring for the elderly, cleaning which involves cleaning the house, cleaning the kitchen and other houses like the animal house and cleaning the surroundings (compound). Women are also in charge of providing certain household equipment, which is important to the performance of their different roles in the family. Such equipment includes mats, baskets, table clothes, chair backs and other home decorations like wall ornaments. All the tasks undertaken by women in the household as occupants of various statuses are facilitated by the availability of water because without water, there would be no life.

Generally, the household represents the back stage because it is where all roles played by members of the community are prepared through socialisation. Apart from that, many people show appearances different from those shown in public. At home women project the image of being hard working by appearing in dirty clothes, while in public they project images such as cleanliness,

humbleness, sociable, hospitable, etc. Their impression management depends on a given definition of the situation and the incumbent's status.

The research revealed that men virtually perform no significant reproductive functions. It is obvious that they participate in child production through mating but other than that, they only lend a hand in other duties at their own convenience. They also perform 'minor' tasks like splitting wood for fuel, sharpening knives and slaughtering. Such are activities that do not have to be done everyday. Apart from that, they are also traditionally abominable for women. It was observed that washing of clothes by males is done only when there is no female in the household or in any other unavoidable circumstances. Only single/widowed men who do not live with a woman or girl wash their own clothes. Women revealed that such a man could even spend months without ever washing their clothes or cleaning the house. Consequently, males have a lot of time for leisure, which can take the form of sleeping, drinking and conversing with friends at the trading centre. Unfortunately for females, despite the actual character of their reproductive work there is no such time for leisure. For example caring for young children is something that has neither beginning nor end. Women are the first to get out of bed to prepare the household for the working day and also the last to go to sleep hence they work more hours than men do.

Overall, the reproductive function of women in the household is based on cultural traditions concomitant with marriage and patriarchy in the study area. These cultural requirements are based on the concept of 'power' and its opposite 'oppression', which is articulated in terms of subordination of women to men. It should however be noted that such sexual division of labour based on women's subordination is not typical of rural areas, but it is almost if not totally a universal phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Women's reproductive roles/tasks have been described as those related to child bearing and rearing. Although such reproductive tasks appear to be

undertaken through inadvertently, the research revealed that many of women's reproductive tasks are influenced by the desire to manage the impressions they give to the 'others'. The others are of different types. Impressions managed for the benefit of the husband may not necessarily be same as those managed for the benefit of the neighbours. This is because of the existence of the back-region and front-region for various audiences'. This study concurs with Goffman's ideas^[1] concerning dramaturgy or the perception of social life as a theatre.

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