The author talks about how indigenous family and social relations tend to be egalitarian, sometimes favouring women (being matrilineal, bordering on matriarchy), but this is slowly being eroded. She warns that the changes in the social structure in traditional Ede villages may result in the subjugation of indigenous women.

The Ede belong to one of the five ethnic minority groups who speak Malayo-Polynesian languages in Viet Nam. At the present time, the Ede live mainly in Oak Lak, a province in the Central Highlands. According to 1995 statistics, this group consists of more than 226,000 people.

Traditionally, the Ede are matrilineal. This is reflected clearly in their family structure, their right to inherit property and be landowners, as well as the fact that women have played an emerging role in traditional society as heads of their households. In this article, the Ede's traditional perception of gender is explained. From this perception some aspects of the relationships between the sexes in the Ede society are revealed. The information is a result of fieldwork among the Ede minority in Viet Nam from 1983 to the present.

The Ede's Perception of Gender

The Ede women play a considerable role in traditional society. They are the head of their families, lineages and landowners. They are highly respected in comparison to men, who have a lower position.

In the family, daughters are always preferable to sons, because the daughters are the "insiders" who are expected to transmit ancestral property as well as live with their parents even after marriage.

The Ede men do not inherit ancestral property. They are "outsiders" even in the family of their parents. In spite of this, the sexual division of labour in the Ede society is similar to other Asian countries, that is, the women are responsible for the domestic chores and the men work outside the household. And in their society, identity of gender (female/male) depends on the tasks attributed to each gender. When an Ede child is one year old, the parents have a ceremony where they place in front of the child tools that are appropriate to its gender. If the child is a girl, her parents put a loom and thread before her. If a boy, they put a crossbow in front of him. They explain that they wish their child to become a good woman or a good man in either domestic work or cultivation. However, the division of labour is even more formalised during the wedding ceremony of a young couple by the representative of the two kin (the Ede call the representative kin dam del).

Women's duties are as follows: carrying wood and water, cooking, weaving, taking care of children and helping the spouse in cultivation. Men's duties include hunting, planting rice, supporting the wife and the children and participating in the work of the village.

I once saw a woman who was the head of a large family cutting some firewood while her male servant was looking at something else. He explained that he was the man and it was not his job to chop wood. In traditional society gender determines the division of work, but the kind of tasks you do also constitutes the basis of gender identity.

During my first fieldwork in an Ede village 14 years ago, I gathered information from young unmarried men in the village until I heard some women saying that I was not a woman! They recognised that I was a female by gender, but I did not do the work that was attributed to women according to their traditional perception of themselves.

Relationship Between Ede Men and Women in the Family and Society

In the Extended Family.....

In the Ede's traditional society, the extended family is the highest unit of the village. Each extended family lives together in a long house (including 4 to 5 generations). The long house's length depends on the number of female members staying there. Each long house is divided into two parts: outside and inside. The outside (called gah) is used for visitors and conducting family rituals and serves as a sleeping place for sons. The inside (called ok) is divided into several apartments for accommodation. However, the inside is only for the head woman of the family, her spouse and her daughters (both unmarried and married).
"Outside" - "Inside"

The sons are the "outsiders" in their parent's family. They do not inherit property and will live in the house of their wives when they marry. However, they serve as the "insiders" (dam dei) when they represent their mother's family in public life, such as in village meetings about cultivation, or participating in traditional village rituals. Also, men represent their kin as matchmakers to ask for a man to marry their niece.

In other words, the sons are the "outsiders" when they do not represent their mother's family and are the "insiders" when they do represent it. They are respected because they are the representatives for their kin in terms of matrilineal kinship. Here, we can recognise that the division of sexual identity is clear between daughters and sons, both in their internal kinship, as well as in their families, and this has continued from generation to generation until 1975 when rapid changes took place.

The daughters are the "insiders" and are, actually, in a higher position in the family than the sons. Daughters inherit ancestral property and are considered as the main members of the family.

The relationship between the Sons and daughters is complicated. The sons must respect their sisters, especially the eldest one, because in the Ede family she is considered as the "mother" whenever the actual mother leaves the house or dies. However, the sisters always ask for and respect their brothers' opinions in important matters, such as for a wedding or funeral, building a new house, buying expensive things or selling land, etc. Brothers are advisers in their sisters' families. Thus, according to traditional custom, the sisters must perform rituals and pray for their brothers' health. At least once, they must pray for each of their brothers by sacrificing a large male pig for them. In fact, sons do not participate in the daily chores of their mother's family because they are "outsiders", but they belong to them when they represent their kin. Therefore, in case a son breaks a traditional law, such as committing adultery or beating someone in the village, even when he is married, his kin must take responsibility and pay a fine to the village, since he belongs to that kin.

Relationship Between Wife and Husband

In the Nuclear Family, the woman is the head of her family. She controls the work that is attributed to a woman and takes care of her children. The husband oversees the cultivation, hunting and fishing to support his family. The wife is responsible for her family's budget and accounts for everything in her family. However, the nuclear family belongs to the extended maternal family, so married couples are under the control of the wife’s grandmother or her mother. The husband has no rights in his wife's family. In fact, all the male members (except the sons) in the extended family are referred to as porong which means "adopted man". As he is an "outsider", his wife's family refuses to take responsibility for any of his errors as mentioned above. He must do the hard work to bring up his family and he does this in order to increase the property of his wife. Ede men describe their status by saying "living together with a sister is to be human; living with a wife is to be a servant".

Although an Ede man's position in the family is generally lower than a woman, both genders are equal in the right to become a parent. The Ede's traditional unwritten law is as follows:

If the wife is too old to have a baby with her new husband, she should permit him to marry another woman in order to give him his paternal right.

In this case, the Ede consider reproduction as vital for the existence of the ethnic group. But in fact, the right of being a father is not always carried out as prescribed by the unwritten law, because the wife's family has to pay a "groom price" in order to marry the husband on behalf of their daughter. The "groom price" is paid when an Ede woman gets married; her mother has to pay in-kind (i.e., a pig, buffalo or chicken) to the groom's mother, and the "price" depends on the requirement of the groom's mother. However, in Ede's traditional society, "cross-cousin" marriages are popular. This means that the Ede woman can marry a son of a father's brother. So the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law would be one of uncle and nephew. Therefore, the Ede's word for father-in-law is awa amiet meaning "uncle".

Relationship Between Men and Women in Ede Society

In former times, the highest social unit of the Ede was the village unit. Normally, a traditional village included about 10 to 30 extended families. This means the number of extended families was more or less dependent on the quantity of arable land of each village.

The Ede kinship system is matrilineal, so all activities in the village are controlled by matrilineal kinship according to the division of gender labour. This is why the village council only includes men (mostly old men).

In general, the men control the public works as headman of the village, judge in court and cultivator of the fields. They make the important decisions in the village. Even in the council of old men who play an important role giving advice to the head- man, no women are directly involved in the decision-making. As I have mentioned above, Ede men are responsible for public works and are only representatives for matrilineal kinship. Normally in Ede's society, the power of the village is the lineage. The lineage depends on the ancestor who founded the village. According to traditional Ede custom the power as well as the assets have been transmitted to the youngest daughter in the family from her mother, but never given power directly and entrusted it to her husband. In case she is unmarried, her uncle (dam dei) will temporarily keep the power while waiting for her to marry someone. Her husband will serve as the village headman to dispatch all its activities.
In fact, he is the representative for his wife and her kin, and his decisions to the villagers must always be contributed by them. Similarly, Ede men are the representatives of their wives (the heads of large families) in village affairs. This is why an Ede man is dismissed from that position when his wife dies. He will go back to his maternal kinship's house and live there for the rest of his life (if he is a very old man).

In case the man is still young and intends to stay with his deceased wife's family to take care of his children, then his wife's family will find a new wife for him. For example, he might marry his wife's sister or her relative. Of course, his mother's family could not ask for the "groom price" again.

**Perception of Gender**

Derived from traditional perceptions, the Ede's identity of gender depends on cultural behaviour ascribed to each gender, in particular to the sexual division of labour. However, the perception of gender is not static and alters in accordance to political-economic changes in each minority.

Since 1975, the Ede's society has been undergoing some fundamental changes due to the socioeconomic development policies of the Vietnamese Government in the Central Highlands. These changes have occurred in different ways from place to place, mainly in large towns and other areas under development. Here, nuclear families are replacing traditional extended families, and Ede men are having a greater role in economic activities in order to support their nuclear families. This has put the men and their wives on a greater parity. Meanwhile, Ede women have been playing a larger role in public life by becoming teachers, nurses, workers, etc., and their power is decreasing vis-a'vis men in the family as they are spending more time away from their households.

In remote areas, most of the traditional customs remain more or less unaffected. The older people (over 50 years) still support the extended family concept, but younger generations are tending toward change.

Today, the structures of power and the gender divisions of labour in the Ede's family and society have been undergoing major changes. Although it is still too early to predict the outcome, the future Ede's perception of gender as well as the relationship between the sexes, will no doubt change into a model similar to that of the Kinh's.

**About the author**

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