Urbanization and the Symbolic Revaluations of the Girls’ Puberty Rite among Urban Wayuu in Maracaibo, Venezuela

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Abstract: This paper provides an evaluation of Wayuu urban domestic household and of girl’s puberty rites linked with traditional assimilation policies within the ethnic revitalizations spirit of the 1999 National Constitution. Recent social changes of these activities reflect an empowerment of the female social role than seems to be linked to an increase political influence of indigenous movement.


Introduction

The girls’ initiation rite practiced by the Wayuu, a matrilineal group of pastoralists on the Guajira Peninsula in northeastern Venezuela and northwestern Colombia, has undergone significant changes as families have migrated to urban centers. Prior to the creation of the new Venezuelan constitution in 1999 granting cultural rights to Venezuela’s indigenous peoples, Wayuu migrant families settling in Maracaibo, Venezuela confronted policies of assimilation. Since the adoption of the new constitution, there has been increased national interest in indigenous rights and ethnicity in Venezuela. The girls’ puberty confinement is a cultural practice that has been affected by Wayuu responses to these historical processes. When practiced in urban settings, the confinement takes on an abbreviated form and lacks the type of education it conveyed in peninsular settings. The changes in the puberty rite are attributable to the demands of formal education and to changing strategies of female empowerment that
prevail in the city. In this article, I draw on ethnographic material from the 1960s and 1970s (Watson 1982; Watson-Franke 1980, 1976) and research I conducted in 2004 to construct a picture of the changes this ritual has endured over the span of the past forty years. Drawing on Jean Comaroff’s work on culture change and the concomitant symbolic revaluations in an African context, I examine the revaluation of the Wayuu domestic household in terms of gender and spatial relations, both under previous policies of assimilation and in the current context of ethnic revitalization. I direct specific attention to the symbolic revaluations of domestic space, educational values and ideas of female empowerment in an urban context.

The Wayuu

The 1992 census assessed the Wayuu population in Venezuela to be approximately 168,000 and 127,000 in Colombia (OCEI 1992). 1 Around 50,000 Wayuu in Venezuela live in predominantly indigenous barrios in northern Maracaibo. They speak an Arawakan language and, in spite of extensive contact with Europeans, Venezuelans, and Colombians, have managed to maintain their language, economic structure and matrilineal social structure (Watson-Franke 1979:95). The majority of Wayuu today are bilingual in their native language and Spanish.

Following contact with the Spaniards in 1499, Wayuu people gradually abandoned their hunting and gathering subsistence patterns and began raising cattle, goats, sheep, horses, burros and mules. During the rainy season on the Guajira Peninsula most Wayuu reside with matrilineal kin in semi-permanent camps at the northernmost areas of their migratory territories (Watson 1968:24). Following a three-month rainy season, family groups divide up and move south to maintain their herds close to water sources. Each matrilineage possesses rights over pasturelands throughout the peninsula that they exploit during the dry season. Limited agriculture is practiced where there is sufficient water and hunting and gathering activities also contribute to the overall economy. Fishing is the principal economic activity in the coastal areas of the peninsula. In 1971, Fuchs estimated that only 25% of Wayuu were still raising livestock, 60% were engaged in some form of wage labor, and 15% were involved in agricultural, fishing, and commercial activities (Fuchs 1971:15).

Wayuu matrilineages belong to approximately thirty matrilineal clans of varying size. Wayuu society is highly stratified in terms of wealth, as measured by herd size and access to political power (Watson 1968:32). Residence patterns tend toward matrilokality and social organization is matrilineal, with each lineage assuming a corporate character (Watson 1968:30). Polygyny is practiced by chiefs and wealthy men. In the absence

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1 Although the Guajira Peninsula is politically divided between two countries, peninsular Wayuu travel back and forth across the Venezuelan/Colombian border frequently.
of centralized political authority, each matrilineage is represented by a chief from one of the wealthier families; whose position is inherited from a maternal uncle (Watson 1976:292). The cacique typically makes decisions in concert with a wealthy headwoman -often his sister- within the matrilineage. In Wayuu society, women have considerable authority within their households and have access to important social positions. The majority of shamans are women and the position of political intermediary (putchipú) has always been open to women as well as men.

The Puberty Rite

The girls’ puberty rite is referred to as the majáyuráa, meaning “the enclosed girl” in the Wayuu language (Polanco 1958:131), and is commonly referred to as el encierro (“the confinement” or “the enclosure”) in Spanish. In the recent past, the duration of the puberty confinement ranged anywhere from several months to five years. Today, when still practiced, the rite typically lasts from a few days to a few months. While there are still some wealthy families on the Alta Guajira Peninsula who continue to enclose their daughters for periods of a year or longer, most peninsular families, like urban families, limit the length of puberty seclusions to avoid interrupting their daughters’ formal education. The puberty rite underscores the influential position women occupy in Wayuu society through its intensive formalized socialization and specialized educational training of young girls. There is no corresponding formalized puberty rite for boys. The rite is understood to ensure the proper physical and psychological transition of a young girl into adulthood. It is believed that young women who do not undergo the rite do not make the proper transition into womanhood and, therefore, remain in a perpetual state of immaturity, rendering them undesirable marriage partners. Senior Wayuu women explain that the purpose of the rite is to produce a young woman who is laula aiín, meaning, “a woman that has the soul of an old woman”, or more specifically, a woman who is balanced, mature, socially respected and capable of making sound decisions. Such a young woman respects her elders, knows how to attend to visitors properly and does not become sexually involved with men until a suitor has offered her family a marriage payment (pañnaa) in accordance with Wayuu custom.

Ideally, at around age ten, Wayuu children are sent to live with their maternal kin: boys with maternal uncles and girls with their maternal grandmothers or maternal aunts (Watson-Franke 1976:194). Often, a girl’s first menstruation occurs will occur while she is living with these relatives. When family members are made aware that a girl has begun to menstruate, she is immediately isolated in a section of the house or in a separate hut built expressly for her puberty confinement. Confinement rituals or encierros, in addition to being observed at menarche, are a common Wayuu response to social or political conflict, sickness and injuries, or to dreams
that presage danger. The spirits of dead ancestors (yoluha) will commonly appear to family members in dreams to inform or warn them about future events. Such spirits will also reveal the precise course of action that the dreamer, or dreamer’s relative should take in order to avoid negative outcomes. Wayuu will respond to such warnings by confining their loved ones to the house to protect them from predicted adverse events. During seclusion rituals the person in danger is bathed frequently, made to fast, and is treated with plant remedies by family members or by a healer.

A girl’s first menstruation is considered to be a critical time within the lifecycle when she is especially vulnerable and impressionable. Her puberty seclusion is deemed vital for her proper development as a human being. Her psychological and physical transition into womanhood is considered to be a crucial period during which many precautions must be taken and prohibitions observed. The initiate must not be seen by men for the entire length of her confinement. During this period she may only come into contact with her maternal female relatives who act as her caregivers and instructors\(^2\). The rite ensures a girl’s safe passage into adulthood through the completion of a series of symbolic gestures and through the use of love charms (contras) intended to increase her beauty and attract a high bride-price (Gutiérrez de Piñeda 1953:52). Most importantly, the puberty rite is understood to mold a young girl’s moral character and to produce a young woman who is laula ai’in, as well as economically independent, socially respected, diplomatic and responsible to her conjugal family and matrilineage.

During seclusion initiates also acquire important productive skills in the form of weaving instruction, as well as knowledge on reproductive management that will enable her to be economically independent (Watson-Franke 1980:340). Watson-Franke (1980) emphasizes that control over the rate of reproduction is critical for a Wayuu a woman since it is she who must earn an income to support her household. As such, weaving instruction is an important component of the education initiates receive during seclusion. Not only does weaving provide a steady source of income for a woman and her family, but expert-level weaving skills are viewed as a source of prestige (Watson-Franke & Watson 1974:24).

The first phase of the puberty rite -or, in Arnold van Gennep’s ([1908]1960) classic model, the phase of separation- occurs at menarche. In the case of the Wayuu, the initiate’s separation is quite literal. She is confined in a windowless hut (shûkona) located apart from the main house or in a room within the family’s house, closed off from the rest of her family members. The initiate may only leave the shûkona at night to relieve herself.

Upon entering the seclusion hut, the initiate is made to lie motionless in the prone position on the ground until midnight, a gesture believed to limit the number of pregnancies she will have in the future (Watson-Franke

\(^2\) The initiate’s caretaker is typically her maternal grandmother or maternal aunt since a girl customarily leaves her mother’s house before the onset of puberty.
At midnight she is given an herbal emetic to empty her stomach of any food she had consumed as a child prior to first menstruation (Gutierrez de Pineda 1950:54). In the next phase of the rite the initiate hangs in a small hammock for the length of her menstrual period. The initiate is placed into a small chinchorro (a loosely woven hammock) and hoisted close to the ceiling where she is expected to lay motionless (Polanco 1958:131). The initiate is denied solid foods during this time and is instead given plant medicines and bland chicha (a boiled corn beverage). One of the medicines consists of a red paste made of ground leaves called pali‘ise in Wayuu or bija roja in Spanish (Bixa orellana) to aid with menstruation and to strengthen and beautify the body. A reformed mineral substance called kasuo in Wayuu (predominantly composed of Calcite) is mixed with water and consumed to suppress thirst. For the first month of her confinement period the initiate is given a natural contraceptive intended to limit her pregnancies later in life. Wayuu are familiar with several types of natural contraceptives: the grated bark of the guayacán tree (Guaiacum officinale) mixed with water (Amadio 2005:327) and maraalapia (Datura innoxia) are but two among several forms they use. Initiates also receive important advisement during this time about how they are expected to behave responsibly, respectfully and with self-control during and after their confinement periods and explain that they must learn to be good hostesses and weavers so that they will be assets to their kin groups (Watson-Franke 1976:196).

Several symbolic gestures are performed during this rite that are intended to sever the initiate from her status as a child, after which she enters the liminal phase of status transition (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969). At the conclusion of her menstrual cycle, the initiate is lowered down and emerges from her chinchorro to be bathed with ice cold water and kute‘ena (Bursera simaruba), an aromatic tree bark that promotes good bodily texture. To ensure the initiate good luck in life, a woman who has high moral standing is chosen to cut her hair (Watson-Franke 1976:198). After shedding the hair connecting the initiate to her earlier status, she is made to give away the clothing and personal effects she used as a child. She is then bathed with cold water, a process believed to make the skin firm and beautiful and is dressed in a new white manta of simple design. The initial bathing often occurs while the initiate stands upon a large flat stone. It was explained that this gesture would ensure that the initiate would not age too rapidly because “rocks are enduring and do not age.” The girl is always bathed with cold water to ensure that any man who approaches her after her puberty confinement will “shiver with fear” and “will treat her with respect.” This is understood to help the girl stay chaste until marriage and hence will assist to preserve and potentially enhance the reputation of her matrilineage.

In addition to encouraging chastity the puberty rite also promotes bodily integrity and beautification through frequent bathing, the ingestion of medicines and rigid food prohibitions. Following the initiate’s first bath and haircut, family members gather for a comilona (feast) recognizing the
beginning of her transition into adulthood. Though she does not participate, the initiate’s personal transition into womanhood is the reason for the gathering and songs are sung foretelling the success of her confinement ceremony: the girl’s skin will become pale and beautiful; her hair, long and black; and she will become a skilled and respected weaver (Watson-Franke 1976:198).

After the first month of inactivity and fasting, the confined girl begins to bathe herself and food restrictions are eased, permitting her to eat meat again. The meat that a girl consumes during her enclosure must come from a young animal, the meat of a young lamb being preferred over chicken and goat meat for its capacity to beautify and to help maintain a youthful appearance. Beef is strictly forbidden, as Wayuu believe it will age the young girl prematurely (Polanco 1958:132). While some of the dietary restrictions are aimed at promoting physical attractiveness, they also have to do with the facilitation of her instruction in weaving. For example, eating beef could cause “the threads on the loom in front of her to become chaotic,” and eating chicken might cause “her eyesight to fail and she would not be able to weave” (Watson-Franke 1976:200). Several urban informants explained that eating dove was especially desirable if it could be obtained because it is a bird that does not age. A female elder explained, “The dove goes through life and never ages. It dies in the same bodily state in which it is born.”

After the period of fasting ends and food prohibitions are eased, the weaving instruction begins. This is a very important phase of the enclosure as weaving skills represent the primary source of a Wayuu woman’s social prestige and economic security (Watson-Franke 1976:203). A girl is first taught to spin cotton, after which she learns to weave bags, belts or hammocks on an upright loom. After she has mastered the processing of raw cotton, the initiate is taught to weave designs by a family member or by an unrelated woman who has been hired for the purpose. If a family has sufficient resources, they may hire a special weaving instructor to teach their daughter more intricate designs (Polanco 1958:132; Watson-Franke 1976:203). Because wealthy Wayuu and urban patrons purchase high-quality weavings at good prices, this additional training provides an important skill that will ensure the initiate’s economic independence later in life. The products that a girl weaves during her enclosure are considered valuable (especially by prospective suitors) and are sometimes sold by her family for cash or in exchange for animals.

The final stage of the rite is characterized by what van Gennep (1960) termed the phase of aggregation or incorporation. In the case of the Wayuu, this phase is signaled by a young girl’s successful transformation that is publicly recognized at a coming-out celebration. After the initiate’s mother or maternal relative decides that she has been enclosed long enough, they arrange a comilona during which she is reintroduced into Wayuu society in the presence of friends, family and prospective suitors. Before she re-enters society, the initiate’s female caretaker gives her a few symbolic strokes with a stick to “push her out” into the world again (Watson-Franke 1976:206).
The initiate is presented to the public at midnight, at which time she and her family are judged by other members of the community on how well she has turned out (Ibid). At the conclusion of her reincorporation into society, the transformed young woman is considered to be marriageable. A couple may then be married if a suitor offers an acceptable bride payment to a young woman’s maternal uncle or father.

**Urban Migration**

Urban and rural migration from the Guajira Peninsula began in the early 1920s because of economic problems incited by drought and the emergence of aggressive labor recruiters who appeared with the discovery of oil in Lake Maracaibo in the 1910s (Gutiérrez 1986:24). As one would expect, the economic and cultural lifeways of Wayuu who have settled in the barrios of Maracaibo have changed significantly as a result of their participation in competitive wage labor and their involvement with Venezuelan culture. The girls’ puberty rite, when practiced in urban settings, takes on an abbreviated form and does not emphasize the same type of education as it did in peninsular settings (Watson 1968:128).

Wayuu settling in Maracaibo have had to adjust to a new economic structure in which they participate primarily as unskilled wage laborers. The scarcity of jobs for both men and women requires men to be mobile in order to follow seasonal work opportunities. The urban environment also offers a relatively high degree of freedom from constraints that held the peninsular individuals accountable to a matrilineal corporate group. This freedom contributes to higher instances of abandonment by husbands of their wives and children in the city. Jobs that demand that urban Wayuu men migrate to rural areas for work, combined with the freedom from social constraints exerted by the corporate matrilineage, give rise to a situation in which Wayuu men are often absent from the household, either permanently or for extended periods. Together these factors contribute to the high instance of single-parent, female-headed households in the barrios. For such households, financial insecurity is an unfortunate reality (Watson 1968:118).

When urban migration started increasing in the 1960s, many peninsular-born Wayuu women who settled in Maracaibo still adhered to traditional images of womanhood and insisted that their urban-born daughters undergo the puberty confinement. Watson’s (1982) life-history study of a female-headed urban Wayuu family indicates that in the city the puberty confinement had become a battleground between generations owing to changing economic and social structures and to the influences of a predominating male-oriented value system. The puberty rite practiced on the peninsula is supported by intergenerational interests through an expected allegiance to the matrilineage and by a matrifocal ideology. For peninsular-born women, a girl’s confinement represented the primary mechanism
through which a girl is transformed into a strong, self-reliant, and economically independent, marriageable young woman. Traditional female characteristics are deemed particularly important by Wayuu mothers in an urban environment, especially in light of the fact that it is more common for husbands to abandon their wives in the city than in rural settings. Urban women experience a loss of economic and social power relative to the peninsular woman who enjoys considerable social influence and is the primary authority figure within the dual-parent nuclear family (Mosonyi et al. 1975:640). In the city, the Wayuu woman’s former role as socializer and educator of her children is threatened by the Western school system (Mosonyi et al. 1975:640; Watson-Franke & Watson 1998:71).

Though primary education was declared obligatory for all Venezuelan children as far back as 1870, this law was not forcefully implemented until 1958 (Duplá 1999:8). During this period, the national agenda, outlined in article 77 of the 1961 Venezuelan constitution, was “to protect and assimilate indigenous peoples into national life” (Base de Datos Políticos de las Américas 1961). The pressure to reject one’s indigenous identity and to assimilate was particularly strong for urban Wayuu from the late 1950s to the 1990s. Although a decree signed in 1979 granting indigenous children the right to an intercultural, bilingual education, the promise is just now beginning to be recognized (Duplá 1999:55). Notable changes in the Wayuu girl’s puberty rite occurred in these 40 years as a result of the policy of acculturation directed toward indigenous peoples. Urban Wayuu girls were exposed to negative images of peninsular women through the formal school system while being inculcated with positive images of Venezuelan women in the national media (Watson-Franke & Watson 1986:152–153). As a result of the propagation of negative images of indigenous people and the need of most single urban Wayuu mothers to work in the commercial sector to support their families, many urban Wayuu mothers completely gave up observing the puberty rite for their daughters during this time period (Watson-Franke 1980:341). In cases where the rite was still observed in the barrios, the puberty confinement was abbreviated, as it became a physical and economic burden to the entire family and interfered with formal schooling.

The emphasis on formal education in the city gave rise to a situation where the puberty rite had become a source of conflict for peninsular-born mothers and their urban-born daughters. Wayuu mothers who insisted upon enclosing a daughter even when it seemed to interrupt her formal education were operating according to a peninsular gender ideology. In contrast to the national gender model, the Wayuu model is organized around women based on the matrilineal principle. Confronted with a male-dominated Venezuelan gender ideology, urban Wayuu women reacted by reasserting a peninsular sense of female identity, of which the puberty confinement is an indispensable component.

A narrative of the Montiel family (Watson 1982) illuminates the changes
that have taken place with respect to the puberty ceremony.  The Montiels are an urban Wayuu family living in Barrio Ziruma in northern Maracaibo. The oldest barrio in Maracaibo, Ziruma was established by the Venezuelan government in 1945, and Wayuu were resettled there from their original urban settlement about a mile to the south (Watson 1968:111). Maria Montiel, a single mother in 1965, was head of a household composed of her two daughters, a son and two grandchildren. Because her husband left her for another woman, Maria survived with support from her brother and a son living in other barrios in Maracaibo. In the city, a formal education is seen as the only means to economic opportunity and, as we shall observe, Maria's daughters have different attitudes toward the formal educational system and consequently toward the puberty confinement. Although Maria wanted to enclose both of her urban-born daughters, she was unable to do so to her satisfaction.

In 1965, Maria’s eldest daughter Rosa (then age 12) reported that she intensely disliked school. Doing poorly and refusing to apply herself to her studies, Rosa willingly submitted to what was to be a yearlong puberty confinement. Maria hoped that the confinement would replace Rosa’s indolence with diligence and a sense of familial responsibility. Maria remarked,

The confinement will make a woman out of her. It will give her the ability to stand on her own and the self-discipline to do the right things. We enclose our girls because it helps to remove all silly thoughts from their minds, thoughts about chasing after boys and getting married before they are women and know who they are (Watson 1982:148).

Maria describes Rosa’s confinement,

I confined my daughter Rosa when she was 13. I put her in a hammock and raised it to the ceiling. For four days she ate nothing. During this time she took Wayuu medicines to develop her character, protect her from sickness and preserve her health into old age. (Watson 1982:76).

Though Rosa complied with the general specifications of confinement, Maria complained that she did not apply herself to learning domestic duties and weaving skills and did not heed the moral lessons. Maria complained that Rosa spent her time reading magazines and sleeping. Maria explained that it was a challenge to keep Rosa confined in such cramped living quarters and that it was a hardship to lose her labor around the house. After

\[\text{\footnotesize 2} \text{ The original passages were published in Spanish and have been translated into English by the author. The author accepts responsibility for any errors in translation.}\]
four months of the projected yearlong seclusion, Maria ended the confinement to allow Rosa to reassume her responsibilities in the household.

In her own words, Rosa describes how she reinterpreted the puberty rite as an attractive alternative to formal schooling,

Mama knew that I didn’t like school and she said that I did not have to go if I did not want to. The one condition was that I would have to be enclosed. I agreed to this. When the time came I did everything I was supposed to . . . I was happy during my confinement but I was very hungry . . . My mother told me that I could not go anywhere and no one could see me except for Luisa and Mama and I could not see anyone. I was careful not to make any unnecessary moves in the first days of my confinement. I could not bathe in the first six days. After this time, she lowered me to the ground and gave me a bath with cold water and some soup to drink which was wonderful since I had had nothing but water for many days. She cared for me very well in spite of this. I could not eat meat because it would age me. Very early every morning, I bathed with cold water to make myself beautiful. This made me very pale to be indoors out of the sun and I left the room only at night to relieve myself. Mama and Luisa brought me food and talked to me and tried to teach me to weave and tried to give me advice. Most of the time, I just slept. I had no desire to study and when I read, I read novels and “las vidas de los santos.” Mama did not like this and said that reading too many novels would make one’s head hollow and make them crazy. After this, I stopped reading (Watson 1982:122).

The narrative about Rosa’s confinement reveals two major changes in the rite as it was practiced by some urban Wayuu. First of all, close living quarters and financial insecurity made it difficult to enforce the full confinement period. Furthermore, Rosa seemed to see the initiation rite as a personal choice. The choice worked to her advantage since she was not interested in pursuing a formal education. She submitted to her mother’s wishes to confine her as an alternative to attending school. Though she elected to be enclosed, Rosa admittedly had no desire to learn to weave or to study. Her experience in the Venezuelan school system and exposure to negative images of indigenous people had influenced her to dismiss as unimportant the Wayuu skills and ideals that her mother tried to convey to her.

In contrast to Rosa, Maria’s youngest daughter Luisa excelled in school and aspired to become a civilizada (civilized person). She was ambitious and confident and saw education as the path to success. Unlike Rosa who was willing to submit to the puberty enclosure (albeit halfheartedly), Luisa
rejected the puberty confinement outright because she perceived it to be part of her Wayuu heritage that would interrupt her education. Maria explained,

Luisa is a young woman who is interested in becoming civilized. She wants to abandon Wayuu culture: it no longer serves her. She is ashamed to speak Wayuu and says that she will not wear a manta (a Wayuu dress) when she becomes a woman. She wants to become a professor and behave like a Venezuelan (Watson 1982:139).

Interestingly, Maria admitted hoping that Luisa would bring respect to the family by becoming a professional woman, such as a doctor, lawyer or professor.

Worried that a yearlong confinement would interfere with her education, Luisa pleaded not to be enclosed. She stated, “Mama, please understand that I want to forget my Wayuu past; it is not important to me. I want to become a teacher to help other Wayuu forget their uncivilized ways” (Watson 1982:139). The following narrative underscores Luisa’s rejection of her Wayuu identity and the adoption of a paternalistic attitude toward indigenous people.

My life is a difficult life of learning the problems of the world. Of learning to master the knowledge of civilization. I want to learn so that I can serve humanity. When I am a professor, God willing, I am going to teach my poor mother to read and write because she knows nothing and has been practically abandoned in this life. I love my mother and want to help her. Not only in the sense of giving her food and clothing, but by teaching her the correct way to live. After all, she suffered for me when I was little and I feel that I should repay her (Watson 1982:139).

Although the reactions of the two daughters toward the puberty rite are different, they both illustrate a rejection of peninsular images of womanhood and the adoption of Venezuelan values toward indigenous people. It is clear that they had been affected by the negative images of indigenous peoples that were reinforced in the classroom, through the media and through everyday interactions with the dominant Creole population.

Maria Montiel’s desire to see her daughter succeed by urban standards caused her to submit to Luisa’s request to forgo puberty seclusion. By allowing Luisa to bypass the confinement so as not to interrupt her education, Maria’s behavior is consistent with the peninsular gender ideology that considers women to be economically self-sufficient and important social actors. Maria and her daughters (especially Luisa) were
operating within a peninsular ideology that insists upon female empowerment through intensive education. While the peninsular emphasis on the education of females remains consistent from the peninsula to the barrios of Maracaibo, the type of education and standards of success in the city adhere to a male-oriented Creole (non-indigenous) value system. The value system of the peninsular-born Wayuu woman, with its emphasis on the matrilineage and on women as autonomous actors, comes into conflict with the value system of her urban-born daughter. Maria’s daughters learned to navigate in an urban environment where the economic structure required a new set of skills, one of them being a formal education. Circa 1970, urban girls viewed formal education as their only chance for future vocational success and economic security. The assimilationist educational agenda also contributed to an outright devaluation of indigenousness. In such an ideological climate, a Wayuu girl who returned to school after having been confined had not only fallen behind in her studies, she also faced ridicule because of her cropped hair which symbolized her indigenousness to non-Wayuu classmates (Watson-Franke & Watson 1998:72).

**A Revaluation of Space and Male/Female Domains**

Urbanization affected a revaluation of social space and male and female domains that Wayuu settling in Maracaibo had to learn to negotiate. These revaluations, in turn, affected revaluations of the woman-centered household, the focal symbol of the puberty rite. Jean Comaroff’s (1985) discussion of culture change and the concomitant spatial and cultural symbolic revaluations in South Africa offers an illuminating conceptual framework with which to understand Wayuu urbanization. In her examination of the cultural changes that resulted from the colonial encounter among the South African Tswana, Comaroff applies Bourdieu’s assertion that inhabited space, such as the household, objectifies the classifications and organizing principles that underpin the wider sociocultural system (Comaroff 1985:54). Comaroff’s analysis of the Tswana house moves beyond material dimensions, treating it instead as symbolic of a larger, subjectively experienced sociocultural reality. She explains,

. . . [T]he material and spatiotemporal forms of the Tswana house must be viewed . . . not merely as things in themselves, but as elemental signs with hidden meanings, mediating between the sociocultural system and the experiencing subjects that live within it. (Comaroff 1985:54)

In her exploration of Tshidi Zionist movements, Comaroff (1985) describes a process whereby notions of space, involving center-periphery relations of the house vis-à-vis other spatial domains, undergo revaluation. She traces the emergence of new spatial orders beginning with a pre-colonial
spatial map that featured centralized institutions of the chieftain at the center and the woman-centered house at the periphery. The origin myth of the Zionist movement rationalizes the re-centering of the church at the periphery based on a historical transformation of the pre-colonial order.

... [W]ith the eclipse of the agnatic domain and the centralized institutions of the chieftain, the uterine house emerged as the elemental social unit in the rural sector, where it stands in complimentary opposition to the urban core, its centrifugal force pulling against the centripetal pressures of the labor market. The homestead in its modern guise constitutes the basis from which the Zionist churches tend to elaborate their sociocultural scheme—a tertium quid between the elemental unit of the uterine house and the collective world of the orthodox institutions and the industrial workplace. (Comaroff 1985: 214).

Hence, the Zionist movement, in aligning itself with the homestead, places itself in a new imaginary mediating position between the centralized institutions of the chieftain and the urban core.

I argue that the culture change experienced by urbanized Wayuu in the 1960s and 1970s involved a similar revaluation of the spatio-structural relationships whereby the female-centeredness of the Wayuu household was revalued as an oppressive force that metaphorically closed a girl off from urban opportunities. This is a drastic departure from peninsular conceptualizations of the puberty rite, which implicated a need to enclose girls because they are innately powerful, a point I address later in further detail. Before analyzing the household as the central symbol of the girls’ initiation ceremony, I first examine how economic and social changes experienced by Wayuu populations owing to urban migration in the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to changes in gendered domains and overall revaluations of social and global space in the urban context.

The Peninsular Household in Local Terms

The typical Wayuu household contains a small house (piichi or miichi), ramada, separate kitchen area, and livestock structures. Some houses feature a separate structure for weaving. The principal house is a small, rectangular structure covered with a pitched roof constructed of dried hearts of cactus (yosú) and covered with dried palm fronds. Zinc roofs and cement structures have become increasingly popular in recent times (González 1990:145).

The principal house is where hammocks are hung and where families store personal property, including several water containers, which are vital in the arid Guajira Peninsula. Next to the principal house is the ramada
(luma), a thatched, flat-roofed structure supported by six posts and featuring wide openings on two opposite sides. The luma is where business transactions occur, visitors are entertained and relatives hang their hammocks to take afternoon siestas. Near to the principal house are livestock corrals, whose size and degree of elaboration depend on the family’s wealth.

Beyond the physical configuration of the Wayuu household, the arrangement of the larger settlement reveals a specific sociocultural configuration. The peninsular Wayuu settlement is composed of five to ten houses that form rancherias or pichipalas (González 1990: 145). Pichipalas are often referred to by their matrilineal affiliation. The residents are related through a common matrilineal relative, with the uterine relatives typically occupying the center position (González 1990:145). Each nuclear household is owned by the senior woman, and they are clustered around the eldest female relative of the matrilineage.

A close network of collaboration, based on the social vehicles of kinship and affinity, is the decisive criteria which supports the functioning of the pichipala as a single social unit (González 1990:145). The members of each pichipala share common rights to cemeteries, land and water resources. With the move to the barrios of Maracaibo, these social obligations cease to operate in the same capacity, as the nuclear family replaces the matrilineage as the primary functioning social and economic unit.

**The Revaluation of Space and the Transformation of Female/Male Relations: Peninsular and Urban Symbolic Meanings of the House**

The shift in meaning that the Wayuu house undergoes with the move from a peninsular to an urban environment can be analyzed on three different, yet interconnected, levels. First, this change in meaning can be seen in terms of a revaluation of space whereby the household reflects transformations in male and female relations. Beyond changes in gender relations, the house must also be considered in terms of changes in its relationship to the other families living in the barrio. Finally, the house must be analyzed in relation to its position within regional space, paying attention to its spatial position within, yet on the margins (both literally and figuratively) of the metropole.

**Urban Economic Conditions and Changing Gender Relations**

The shifts in meaning occurring with respect to the Wayuu household are the consequence of a changing economy—namely, the shift from semi-nomadic pastoralism to competitive wage labor. This economic shift has significantly affected changes in gender relations within the domestic sphere. The opposed, yet complimentary, male and female economic domains that characterized peninsular relations are replaced, in urban
settings, by a new arrangement wherein the majority of nuclear family members (children included) are wage earners and together comprise an independent economic unit.

The principal domestic unit among peninsular Wayuu is the conjugal family. As previously mentioned, families live in separate rancherias within larger settlements composed of other members of the matrilineal extended family (Watson 1968:27). Women take on a central role within the domestic household because males need to be mobile to satisfy the demands of a pastoral economy. While the household is the domain of women, the pastureland surrounding the household is the domain of men. Men are responsible for the management of livestock, the construction of domestic structures and corrals, and hunting (Watson 1968:27). Wayuu males in the peninsula take responsibility for the planning and execution of pasturing, watering and moving livestock. Young boys begin to learn the pastoral trade from their fathers at an early age and begin herding at around age seven (Watson 1968:27). In addition to the mobility demanded of Wayuu men to tend livestock, the practice of polygyny and the matrilineal principle require husbands to travel to the rancherias of their different wives. These factors give rise to what Watson (1968:27) refers to as the “detached husband syndrome”.

Other conditions in Wayuu society have led some to describe it as normative women-centered (Watson-Franke & Watson 1998:65). In addition to owning land and property (inherited from maternal kin), Wayuu women own livestock. Not only do peninsular women gather wild plants, milk livestock, gather firewood and haul water, they own and hold authority over the household in terms of managing economic resources, socializing children (including overseeing her daughter’s puberty confinement) and producing textiles for sale and barter. Peninsular women frequently travel to markets in urban areas to sell their woven textiles and surplus animals and to purchase staples for their families. As I mentioned, in addition to being the principal decision-makers within the domestic household, peninsular women also have access to important social positions such as that of political intermediary (putchipū) or shaman*. In urban settings, the economic contributions of men shifts from the tending of livestock to unskilled, low-paying, sporadic wage labor. The majority of urban Wayuu males occupy low-paying, temporary positions as construction workers, gardeners, cab and truck drivers, security guards, factory workers, mechanics and street vendors (Watson 1968:114). The female domain is also revalued in the urban context. Urban Wayuu women continue to occupy a central role within the household as men work long hours and often work away from home for extended periods of time. Unlike rural women urban women sell dry goods to supplement their husband’s

* Michel Perrin estimates that the proportion of men to women among Wayuu shamans is one to seven (Perrin [1976] 1987:130).
income and many perform domestic work outside of the home for a meager wage. The women-centered household common in the barrios is the result of a high degree of male marginality rather than reflecting female autonomy characteristic of the peninsular gender dynamic (Watson-Franke & Watson 1998:70). In many cases children also work, producing and selling goods or performing domestic jobs to contribute to the household economy.

Peninsular gender relations wherein women enjoyed a high degree of autonomy underwent a significant transformation in the city. Aside from the higher incidence of male abandonment in the city, the relations between husbands and wives who stayed together also changed. One significant change concerns the grouping together of male and female activities within the household. Whereas a mother and her brother had previously shared jural authority over her children on the peninsula, in the city men become more involved in decision-making within the household. The dichotomous yet complementary peninsular domestic arrangement is transformed into one aligned with a Western model of the nuclear family, whereby the urban Wayuu household becomes the principal economic unit.

**The Autonomous Nuclear Family Replaces the Corporate Descent Group**

In addition to the transformation of male and female domains in the barrio, the urban occupational system fractures the economic function of the lineage as jobs are made available to competing individuals according to merit and regardless of clan or lineage status (Watson 1968:117). Maternal family networks are replaced by the immediate nuclear family as the most important unit. Wayuu migrate from the peninsula individually or in small families, leaving behind their matrilineal extended family networks. In peninsular settings, the corporate descent group shares responsibility for the actions of its members, and conversely, members are accountable to their matrilineage for their actions. In the barrio, the matrilineal extended family is less prevalent than it is on the Guajira Peninsula and, in general, the urban nuclear family acts as an autonomous unit (Watson 1968:121). Finally, while peninsular Wayuu are reliant upon lineage affiliation to provide moral and legal structure on the peninsula, urban Wayuu have to deal with the Venezuelan system of law in addition to their own system of dispute settlement (la ley Wayuu) which they still rely on in the barrios to resolve minor conflicts between Wayuu families.

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1 Watson estimated that around 20% of Wayuu households in Barrio Ziruma in the 1960s were headed by single mothers (1968:119).
**Peninsular versus Urban Spatial Relations between the Household and Other Domains**

Culture change experienced by urban Wayuu because of participation in a wage economy is also accompanied by transformations of spatial relations. The first transformation of space that occurs in the barrio relates to gendered economic domains within the household. Peninsular categories of male and female domains are positioned in complementary opposition to one another. Pastureland is the male domain and the principal responsibilities of peninsular men involve the management and movement of livestock herds. The conjugal household is the domain of women, which sits in spatial opposition to pastureland. Wayuu women milk livestock and manage domestic space. These peninsular gendered economic relations are transformed in urban space as male and female domains merge. In most cases, all family members are engaged in competitive wage labor as the nuclear family becomes the independent economic unit in the barrio.

The second spatial transformation in the barrio involves the house vis-à-vis the surrounding community. In peninsular settings, the house is connected to a larger network composed of other members of a matrilineal extended family. The peninsular household is a unit of landholding that is morally and legally accountable to a larger corporate decent group. In urban settings, the conjugal household is the principal economic unit. While it is true that urban households often exchange resources with extended family living on the Guajira, on a day-to-day basis the urban household tends to function more autonomously as it often surrounded by non-kinsmen. The peninsular household is but one component of a larger settlement of other households belonging to the same matrilineal corporate group, whereas the urban nuclear family is an economically independent unit competing with other unrelated nuclear families for low-paying jobs.

Lastly, space is also transformed in the barrio respecting the position of the house vis-à-vis the wider regional sphere. In a successful pastoral economy, a complementary relationship between male and female domains exists. In addition to being a symbolic space that connects male and female domains, the peninsular household may also be treated as symbolic space that mediates between the peninsular and urban worlds. Wayuu women often travel to urban markets to sell textiles and surplus animals for cash with which they purchase goods and foodstuffs for their families. Peninsular Wayuu women act as brokers who mediate the sale of products (woven textiles) from their own domain as well as animals from the male domain. In this manner, the peninsular household (the center for the production of textiles for trade in urban areas) represents an intermediary space which links peninsular pastureland (a male domain) to the market economy of the urban center.

The relationships of peninsular spatial categories are transformed in the barrios of Maracaibo. The household no longer occupies a mediating position
between male and urban domains; rather, it is repositioned on the margins of, or in opposition to, the market economy of the urban core. The relationship of the urban domestic unit is one of dependence upon the urban center. The Comaroff & Comaroff (1992) analysis of strategies of colonial domination through the control and reconfiguration of domestic space is useful in evaluating how the Venezuelan government attempted to contain and control urban Wayuu populations through modernization. In a paternalistic gesture toward Wayuu migrating to urban centers because of a failing pastoral economy, the Venezuelan government built Barrio Ziruma, which at the time was situated on what was the northeastern border of Maracaibo. The government built 140 concrete homes organized around a central plaza and allowed Wayuu residents to live there rent-free. Positioned around a central plaza are various symbols of modernization and Venezuelan authority: a police station, hospital, Capuchin Church, school building and a movie theater. Barrio Ziruma was created as a cultural microcosm of mainstream urban life but was situated on the margins of urban space. Although inextricably dependent upon urban economic and cultural life through an imposed revaluation of domestic space, the majority of barrio residents are relegated to the periphery and denied full participation.

A Symbolic Revaluation of the Urban Household and the Puberty Rite

As practiced in peninsular settings, the girls’ initiation ceremony symbolizes the weight of female responsibility as household manager, educator and socializer of her children, and as a businesswoman. Gender-specific knowledge received through the protracted period of confinement is the principal source of female power and autonomy.

One source discusses the importance of the puberty rite as a reenactment of the basic structure found in Pulowi myths (Perrin 1976/1987:129). Juya and Pulowi are a mythical husband and wife. There are several manifestations of Pulowi, all of them said to be the wives of Juya, who, like some Wayuu men, also practice polygyny. Pulowi is considered to be a dangerous, cunning man-eater, and a mistress of game animals who stingily surrenders animals from her herd to a few chosen hunters (Perrin 1987:95). According to Perrin, the puberty seclusion of a young girl can be regarded as a metaphorical representation of Pulowi:

Having to acquire the maximum “femininity” with a view to marriage, she can be regarded as metaphorically taking the place of that mythical being by remaining “hidden indoors” and going out only at night time-to-relieve herself-unseen by anyone. Neutralized by marriage, she is subsequently considered to have departed from this “zenith” (Perrin 1985:129).

Linguistic evidence also supports the claim that girls in seclusion are considered dangerous and powerful. Enclosed girls are regarded as pūlasū,
meaning “dangerous, taboo, and related to the supernatural world” (sup. cit.:130). The rite is a source of female empowerment since it is the vehicle through which a girl becomes knowledgeable about contraception, weaving and the importance of self-reliance. By confining young women within the domestic domain, the rite is a strategy aimed at containing and perpetuating female power connected to that domain. Confining a girl to the house closes her off from others both to protect them from her (and vice versa) and to properly channel female power according to cultural values and practices. In contrast, the urban house, which is positioned both literally and figuratively on the fringes of urban space, no longer occupies the powerful central position of the peninsular household. In the urban setting, the house and the puberty rite are transformed into mechanisms that metaphorically partition a girl off from opportunities for empowerment which are attained through formal education in the urban context. For urban families who faced assimilation policies during the 1960s and 1970s, the meaning of female education changed. Education became geared toward female empowerment through professionalism and increased earning power. Luisa Montiel’s refusal to be confined because it would destroy her educational opportunities clearly illustrates her fear of being precluded from becoming a professional or civilizada. While the peninsular house closes a girl off from others because of her symbolic potency during puberty seclusion, being secluded in the urban house was perceived as closing a young girl in and preventing her from the pursuit of mainstream notions of empowerment. Although the value of female education persists with the move from peninsular to urban settings, the concept of the house is revalued as a signifier of a loss of female power. The urban house is positioned in opposition to the real source of power (formal education) in contrast to being a vehicle for the promotion and perpetuation of female power from the peninsular standpoint.

A Revalorization of Indigenous Identity: A Second Revaluation of the Urban Household and the Puberty Rite

In the current context of the indigenous rights movement, and the celebration of pluriethnic Venezuela, the puberty rite is undergoing yet another symbolic transformation. The puberty rite has taken on symbolic significance as an emblem of Wayuu cultural tradition and is being promoted by influential leaders as necessary for the perpetuation of strong female leadership. It is seen as a necessary part of a Wayuu woman’s education that will enable her to more successfully navigate both the indigenous and western worlds (Blanchet-Cohen 1997:41). The indigenous movement, beginning in the 1970s with the establishment of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, catalyzed a worldwide proliferation of indigenous organizations and international documents and treaties that have provided legal leverage for indigenous activism at the national level. In
Venezuela, such documents have inspired the establishment of a special chapter on the rights of indigenous peoples in the new Venezuelan constitution of 1999 created under President Hugo Chavez. Wayuu activist Noeli Pocaterra, as co-creator of the chapter on indigenous rights, helped to create a legal platform for Wayuu cultural revitalization efforts and for the social and political validation of indigenous identity in general. In contrast to the national agenda of assimilation in the 1961 constitution, the new constitution promises that the Venezuelan State shall recognize the needs, culture and spirituality, and collective land rights of its indigenous groups (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela 1999).

Wayuu cultural revitalization efforts are currently taking place at community centers and public schools (through a nascent project called guapulé) in the lower Guajira Peninsula and in Maracaibo, where contact with Venezuelan culture has been the most intense. Wayuu leaders like Pocaterra are outspoken about the importance of the girls’ puberty rite in Wayuu society. She reminds Wayuu parents and youth that the education that she herself received during her puberty confinement has proven to be her greatest asset in preparing her for her role as activist and spokeswoman for indigenous rights (Blanchet-Cohen 1997:41). Pocaterra stresses that the puberty rite is not only necessary to prepare a young woman to head, advise and guide her family in a matrilineal society, but that it can prepare her to face the difficult demands that accompany the simultaneous navigation of an indigenous and western world (Blanchet-Cohen 1997:41).

Urban local leaders have followed Pocaterra’s lead in encouraging urban families to hold the puberty rite for their daughters. As more Wayuu have moved into leadership positions, they have promoted the survival of Wayuu cultural traditions such as the puberty ceremony. Wayuu elementary school teachers in the barrios of Maracaibo are allowing Wayuu mothers to temporarily remove their daughters from school to hold the puberty rite. There is an ongoing attempt on the part of local leaders to revalorize the urban Wayuu household by recreating a version of the peninsular women-centered household. By encouraging the practice of the encierro, the vehicle through which young women became central social actors in peninsular communities, local leaders are attempting to move the urban household from a marginal position toward a more central position characteristic of peninsular life. Urban Mothers emphasize the importance of both the encierro and public schooling in attaining status in the city. Wayuu women who are leaders and professionals are seeking to recreate the urban household as a space that functions in harmony with the demands of the city. They aim to accomplish this by restoring the Wayuu household as the source of women’s empowerment as it existed on the peninsula-occupying a mediating position between the male domain and the urban center.

While Watson & Watson-Franke’s earlier research indicated that many urban Wayuu mothers had completely given up enclosing their daughters in the customary manner, the majority (22 of the 26) of women I interviewed during a pilot study in 2004 had undergone the puberty seclusion. A third
of the urban young women interviewed were enclosed from 1 to 3 days, another third from 1 to 3 weeks, and another third between 1 and 3 months. The brevity of their enclosure was most often attributed to the fear of falling behind in school. Though the brief period of enclosure seemed to preclude the possibility of weaving instruction during the confinement, weaving is still being taught and is still a source of income for some families. Despite the variability in the length of the seclusions, there was a high degree of uniformity in the dietary observations and other elements of the rite. My research revealed that fasting, the use of pali'ise and kasuo, the cropping of the initiate's hair, the replacement of the old clothing with new and the educational narratives directed toward the girl about her important transition are still essential components of the rite as it is currently being practiced in the barrios of Maracaibo. Modern narratives-in addition to stressing the importance of being chaste, disciplined and respectful-also emphasize the need to be focused and disciplined with respect to one's studies. In fact, whereas in the past initiates were made to remain perfectly still and idle while fasting in a hammock during first menstruation, urban initiates are permitted to do school work during this time so they do not fall behind in their studies. Furthermore, in addition to lacking weaving instruction, characteristic of earlier peninsular versions of the puberty rite, the urban version of the rite also lacked the use and education on natural contraceptives described by Watson-Franke (1976).

Significantly, twenty-five of the twenty-six women interviewed (including young women who had not undergone the puberty rite themselves) said that they intended to enclose their own daughters. The majority of my informants offered culture-conscious explanations for their desire to observe the puberty rite for their daughters, such as, “I would enclose my daughter to continue our Wayuu traditions,” or, “the survival of our traditions depends on us.” Such explanations suggest that the indigenous movement and the revalorization of indigenous identity in Venezuela have affected a revival of the girl's puberty right among urban Wayuu during the past twenty years. It seems likely that the girls' puberty rite will continue into the future as more Wayuu women enter leadership positions as political activists, community promoters, elementary school teachers and university professors.

Conclusions

Large-scale historical changes experienced by Wayuu peoples over the last four decades, such as the declaration of mandatory schooling, policies of acculturation and increased urban migration and participation in a capitalist economy, have had a significant impact on the girls' puberty rite. Changing attitudes toward the puberty rite are indicative of a revaluation of the spatial and symbolic terms of the house in urban settings. The revaluation of the urban household reflects changing structures of male/female domains and transformed spatial relations between the
household and other economic, social and cultural domains. The declaration of mandatory education (enforced in the late 1950s) and pressures to assimilate into the dominant culture have deterred many urban families from holding the puberty rite for their daughters in the 1960s and 1970s (Watson-Franke 1980). When the rite was observed, the duration of the enclosure was shortened and the type of education a girl received during the confinement changed. The changes in the rite reflected changes in channels for female empowerment and definitions of success. The apparent resurgence of the girls’ puberty rite among urban Wayuu appears to be directly related to the growing influence of the indigenous movement in Venezuela. The revalorization of indigenous identity in Venezuela has given rise to a strong sense of ethnic pride among indigenous groups that has induced yet another symbolic revaluation of the Wayuu girls’ puberty ceremony that, judging by my recent research, will positively affect the lives of future generations of urban Wayuu women.

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