

THE PERSONAL NETWORKS

OF SOME SRI LANKAN POTTERS

BY

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Abstract

Network analysis is the study of the links between individuals (or sometimes groups and institutions) and the ramifying pattern these constitute. A "personal network" is any network focussed upon a particular individual, or "network subject". This study presents and analyses personal networks of seven Sinhalese Potters of common age and background, between whom wide variations as well as general similarities are found.

Artisans in Sri Lanka, including potters, have been studied in little sociological depth. This study offers an analysis of economic and social organization in a small dry zone community of Sinhalese Potters: "Ratmalagahawewa", near Galgamuwa, northern Kurunegala District. Analysis of paddy land holdings, housing and occupation suggests that the community is relatively egalitarian and homogeneous, particularly in contrast to the neighbouring Goyigama community of "Heratgama".

Almost all of the households in Ratmalagahawewa engage in pottery manufacture, which, with pottery trading, dominates the village economy. It is often combined with agricultural activities. Analysis of occupation and personal network show that pottery manufacture is a domestic enterprise employing household labour, and using cheap, simple tools and locally available raw materials. By marketing their own wares directly, potters can and often do secure economic independence for their households. Many potters rely upon local middlemen traders to market their wares, but little economic independence is lost to these competing traders. With regard to agricultural activities, chena cultivation is also household based; but paddy cultivation involves the household in a wider set of relations involving access to paddy land, labour and tools. Nevertheless, paddy cultivation teams are typically restricted to close kin, again modifying the independence of the household only slightly.

Household independence generates a pattern of segmentation, household by household, within the community. The personal networks correspondingly reveal very little interhousehold co-operation; but, similarly, very little interhousehold conflict: factionalism and party political conflict are not present. Segmentation inhibits the establishment of leadership, which is in practice restricted to a weak form of brokerage.

More generally, individuals appearing in the personal networks, about half of whom are kinsmen, are predominantly small farmers, potters and rural folk like the Ratmalagahawewa Potters themselves, and are generally located in the same region. The restricted character of the networks matches the "community orientation" observed in Ratmalagahawewa generally: an orientation supported by a lively sense of community

expressed in terms of kinship solidarity, adherence to *varige* ("subcaste") endogamy and the observance or reactivation of traditional ritual practices. Significantly, the Potters regard ties of friendship outside the structured contexts of kinship and ritual specialism rather ambivalently, probably because the structure of public order is threatened by such unstructured, comparatively "private" relationships.

Although the region has been subject to social and economic incorporation by national institutions for a century, the community orientation persists, reinforced by the increasing prosperity brought by the traditional occupation of pottery manufacture. Formerly a minor medium of caste service within a localized caste economy, pottery now constitutes a type of petty commodity within the developing market economy: thereby altering the character and significance of the traditional occupation. Social and economic relations between villages have accordingly been transformed, and the values associated with caste and community reformulated.

Network analysis is found to be a helpful perspective, but only as a means to substantive or theoretical ends. Further, the problem of identifying and defining the phenomenological "content" or meanings embodied in network links demands that networks be adequately contextualized as they are recorded and analysed. As in the present study, therefore, network analysis must be subordinated to more general anthropological enquiry.