

**Linda J. Seligmann, ed.**

**Women Traders in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Mediating Identities, Marketing Wares.**

Stanford University Press, 2001, 308 pp.

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This is a welcome addition to recent publications on market women, focusing on market women's identity (and ethnicity) and on how economic behaviours both shape and "are shaped by local cultural practices and values, especially those pertaining to gender" (p. 1).

This volume developed from an invited session that the editor, Linda J. Seligmann, organized at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in 1995. Seligmann provides only the Introduction and Conclusion, although she has published significant materials on this and related subjects in recent years, as have all the contributors, all anthropologists.

The editor's Introduction situates this volume within recent scholarship on market women, as does Florence Babb's penultimate chapter which explores some thoughts on how the field has evolved over the past two decades (Babb was a discussant at the AAA session). For both, at the time of the AAA session from which this book developed, "Working to understand the intimate intersection of culture and economy in the context of women traders was a relatively uncommon thing to attempt to do" (p. ix). In fact, for Seligmann and Babb, a "political economy" framework, at that time, narrowly focused on the *economics* of market women's activities (p. 1, 24). "In contrast," the editor claims, "the contributors to this volume, some of whom also use political economy as a framework, treat as an analytic whole both the economic *and cultural* practices that shape the lives" of market women (p. 1, emphasis added). Rather than disengaging the economic from political and cultural practices, values, locations and meanings, the contributors examine the more nuanced and dialectical webs, interactions, and interrelationships between and amongst them all in their individual chapters.

Most contributors, of course, describe the actual "economic" activities of these market women, including some "thick descriptions" of: the difficulties and subtleties of entering market work; unit and bulk buying and selling; pricing and bargaining; credit and debt negotiations; and risk taking and risk avoidance. Jennifer Alexander and Paul Alexander's chapter on the Javanese *pasar* and B. Lynne Milgram's chapter on upland Philippine Ifugao handicraft traders were especially rich regarding such details.

And, of course, these studies emphasize the interconnections between women's "economic" market activities, existing, and changing, gender ideologies and, among many other things: domestic and reproductive labour; kinship, marriage and family; mothering; and household structures and strategies. The gendered division of labour within and between households, and relationships between communities and regions, are central to most analyses. In addition, particular case studies examine ways in which women use and manipulate "kinship" connections, loyalty, reciprocity, and social skills, networks and information to help them to be successful in their marketing and other activities. Other cases illustrate how ethnicity, race, class, religious belief, rural-urban connections, municipal and state policies and practices, and "globalization" are used and manipulated, often creatively and imaginatively by the market women themselves, to encourage or dissuade women from participating in market

work. Women's organizing and resistance are also explored. Deborah A. Kapchan's chapter discusses how women have been able to utilize a culturally- and gender-specific speech genre and pure verbal artistry to claim space in the predominantly male Moroccan marketplace, or *suq*.

To illustrate the richness of some of the chapters within a brief review, I can briefly mention some examples. Poor Indian women in Chennai (formerly Madras) are forced to leave the domestic sphere to earn whatever they can to support their families, but, in doing so, they enter the public sphere and interact with non-kin males, "which contravenes cultural norms of gender behavior...To preserve moral legitimacy, women traders invoke ideals of sacrificial motherhood and rely on a technique of public chaperonage" (Johanna Lessinger, p. 73). Lessinger also notes, somewhat ironically: "As a result, this discourse about suffering and sacrifice makes it difficult for women to articulate how or why they get satisfaction out of their work as traders" (p. 94).

"Nursing-mother work" is the phrase used among Akan Kumasi women traders to denote the priority for mothers of young children to give economic (financial) support to their children (Gracia Clark, p. 103). Akan mothers need some money and food coming in on a *daily* basis: therefore they cannot wait or take risks in hopes of accumulating capital and they cannot rely on paid employment (with a weekly or monthly salary) or cash crops (with an annual or seasonal harvest income) (pp. 112, 114). Marketing allows women to have a regular, if small, daily income; and, as Clark points out, any unsold "surplus" (local) foodstuffs can be taken home to one's family at wholesale cost. This is increasingly crucial after decades of "structural adjustment" in Ghana.

Hungarian women (in the late "socialist" period) "conspicuously demonstrated their capacity to adjust themselves to the system and to ingeniously assert and redefine their identities" (Éva Huseby-Darvas, p. 205). By invoking "tradition," religion, and ingenuity to defend their marketing activities ("snowflowering") as "authentic resourceful Calvinist women," they partially conform to the norms of the community, as well as bring in necessary resources for their families' survival and increasingly conspicuous consumption, especially of the young (pp. 196, 205). But their husbands and children were against this economic activity, because it involved long-distance travel to cities and was considered too risky, embarrassing and "Gypsylike": the women were "harshly criticized and stigmatized" within the "competing patriarchal ideology" (pp. 185, 195-6). With the transition to "market capitalism," transportation costs have increased and, with open borders, cheap competitive goods and traders are everywhere; women have lost their ties to the markets (p. 206).

Many contributors discuss the notion of cultural and ethnic identity, as the subtitle of the book indicates. This may include both market women's "presentation of self" to others (potential buyers and sellers) and the market women's own subjective identities; and each can be affected by, and effect, "others'" perceptions of the market women and their communities. Here contributors discuss issues of cultural "authenticity," "tradition," and "savvy," "modern" "entrepreneurs." (Judith Marti discusses the identity of Mexican market women as extracted from archival records. Lynn Sikkink discusses identity and ethnicity among women sellers of traditional medicines in Bolivia. Most of the other contributors also discuss ethnic and cultural identity.) While several of the contributors discuss "mediating" between "*multiple* identities" in the women's "presentation of self" to others, in terms of the market women's own subjective identities it makes more sense to speak of *simultaneous* "hybrid" or "hyphenated identities" as Seligmann (p. 6) and Milgram (p. 158, quoting and citing Cook) do.

The various chapters in this collection vary in their methodological and theoretical approaches and, as with most edited books with multiple authors, they also vary in their styles of presentation. There are enough original and imaginative analyses in this book to stimulate and to satisfy most readers concerned with *Women Traders in Cross-Cultural Perspective*.

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