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## Modern Matriarchal Studies

### And Two Examples of Matriarchal Societies

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#### 1. Traditional matriarchal studies

Traditional matriarchal studies have existed for a long time in the German language realm, already beginning in 1861 with Johann Jakob Bachofen's work *Das Mutterrecht (Motherright)*.<sup>1</sup> Just before that, the ethnological field of matriarchal studies was initiated by Henry Lewis Morgan.<sup>2</sup> For more than a century the discussion about "mother right" and "matriarchy" continued in both bourgeois-conservative and Marxist-leftist circles, but exclusively from a male perspective. In the process the topic was used and misused from the most various viewpoints by philosophical schools and political movements.<sup>3</sup>

Astonishing in these various works on the topic "mother right" or "matriarchy" is the lack – despite good collection of material – of a clear definition and a scientific foundation of this research area. The concept "matriarchy" remained so indistinct that nearly everyone could understand it in a different way. That omission has opened the gates for emotions and ideologies that have burdened this discussion from the very beginning.

As a result, there are massive back projections of bourgeois-patriarchal conditions onto early cultural history, similar to the projections in anthropology onto non-patriarchal indigenous societies.

#### 2. Modern Matriarchal Studies

A turning point is indicated by the beginning of Modern Matriarchal Studies, a scientifically well-grounded field of study that has appeared over the past few decades, and is rapidly undergoing further development. Through my own work (in German since 1978) a definitional, methodological and theoretical basis was created – without which this research could not achieve its wide-ranging goals.

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen: *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, Princeton, N.J., 1967, Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan: *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois*, (2 volumes), 1851/1871/1877, new edition 1965, Sage & Brother/USA.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies. Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*, New York 2012/2013, Peter Lang Publishing, Chapter 1.

This task consists in creating an adequate representation of the matriarchal societal form in all its enormous geographical and historical breadth. Providing it with a scientific foundation entails:

- first, formulating an empirically grounded, adequate definition of “matriarchy” capable of grasping the basic characteristics of this societal form;
- second, developing an explicit methodology able to discover and analyze all phenomena within this field of research;
- third, developing a theoretical framework that can integrate a huge mass of material consistently, which exists but is scattered and misunderstood until today, thereby grasping the wide range of matriarchal societal forms systematically and with sensitivity.

The first requirement for a scientific foundation was fulfilled when I developed a structural definition for the field of research “matriarchy”. I made comparative studies of as many currently existing societies of this kind as possible in order to find their common denominators on the four societal levels: social, economic, political, and cultural. While doing this I learned a lot from my indigenous friends from these societies whom I was happy to meet at several opportunities.

That is, the new definition of “matriarchy” was not produced in abstraction and thus projected onto the field of study. Instead, it was developed inductively, step by step, through analytical observation of these societies and through continued learning.

### 3. The definition of „matriarchy“

On principle, matriarchies are egalitarian and mother-centered societies. They are based on maternal values, such as care-taking, nurturing, perfect mutuality, solving conflicts by negotiation and active peace building. These values hold for everybody: for mothers and those who are not mothers, for women and men alike. Thus matriarchal societies are consciously built upon the maternal values and motherly work. They are, on principle, need-oriented and not power-oriented. Their precepts aim to meet everyone’s needs with the greatest benefit. So, in matriarchies, mothering – which originates as a biological fact – is transformed into a **cultural model**.

All of these societies – which still exist or existed until recently in Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific area – are gender-egalitarian, and most of them are fully egalitarian. This means they have no hierarchies, classes nor domination of one gender by the other.

How they do achieve this can be seen when we look at their patterns more closely:

*At the social level*, matriarchal societies are based on the clan, and on the the “symbolic order of the mother”. This also means maternal values as spiritual principles, one that humans take from nature. Mother Nature cares for all beings, however different they may be. The same applies to matriarchies: a good mother cares for all her children, embracing their diversity.

Matriarchal people live together in large kinship groups, formed according to the principles of matrilineality and matrilocality. That means the people live together in

the mother's house, and the clan's name, and all inheritance and social status are passed on through the mother's line.

These principles of matrilineality and matrilocality put mothers at the center; in this way women guide their clans without ruling.

By their system of common motherhood and perfect mutuality, they shape a society that sees itself as a big clan, where everybody symbolically is "mother" or "sister" or "brother" to everybody else. Thus I define matriarchies on the social level as *non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship*.

This social order based on motherhood includes far reaching consequences for the *economic level*. Matriarchal economy is a subsistence economy, there is no such thing as private property, and there are no territorial claims. The people simply have usage rights on the soil they till, and parcels of land are worked on communally.

Most importantly, women have the power of disposition over goods and clan houses, and especially over the sources of nourishment: the fields and the small herds of animals. All the goods are put into the hands of the clan mother, and she distributes them equally among her children and grand-children. She is responsible for the sustenance and protection of all clan members.

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This distinction that the economy is in the hands of women is decisive to make a society a 'matriarchal' one, and differentiate it from a merely 'matrilineal' one. In a merely matrilineal society, the economy is in the hands of men, which makes up a very different form of society. Until today, this distinction between matrilineal societies on one hand and matriarchal ones on the other has not been made, which has caused much confusion.

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In a matriarchal economy, the clans enjoy perfect mutuality: every relative advantage, or disadvantage, in terms of acquiring goods is mediated by social guidelines. For example, at the seasonal festivals of the agricultural year, clans that are comparatively better off will invite all the inhabitants to be their guests and give away their goods as a gift to all their neighbours. Since this is the general attitude, matriarchal economy can be called a "gift economy". It is the economic manifestation of the maternal values, and due to these features, I define matriarchies on the economic level as *societies of economic mutuality, based on the circulation of gifts*.

The patterns of *the political level* follow the principle of consensus, which means unanimity regarding each decision. To manifest a principle like this in practice, a society must be specifically organized to do so, and matrilineal kinship lines are, once again, the starting point.

The basis of each decision-making is the individual clan house where the people live. Speakers of the clans – in most of the cases men – meet together in the village council or regional council, but do not make decisions themselves; they simply communicate the decisions that have been made in their clan houses. These speakers move between the clan houses and the local council or regional council back and forth until consensus of a village or of the whole region is reached.

In this way, a true “grass roots democracy” – as we could label it – is put into practice. This clearly shows how maternal values also permeate political practice. Therefore, I define matriarchies on the political level as *egalitarian societies of consensus*.

But such a societal system as matriarchy could not function as a whole without a deep, supporting and all-permeating spiritual attitude. *At the cultural level*, matriarchal people regard divinity as immanent, for the whole world is regarded as divine: as feminine divine. This is evident in the widely held concept of the universe as the Great Goddess who brought forth everything by birth, and of the earth as the Great Mother who created everything living.

In such a culture, everything is spiritual and celebrated in elaborate ceremonies. There is no separation between sacred and secular, so even the everyday tasks also have ritual significance. In this sense matriarchal societies are sacred ones. Therefore, I define matriarchies on the spiritual level as *sacred societies and cultures of the Divine Feminine or Goddess*.

Methodologically it is important to note that matriarchal societies today have gone through many changes. After a long history of struggling to defend their ancestral cultures, and now threatened by increasing pressure from their patriarchal surroundings, they have changed in many aspects. This is why it is crucial to consult the histories of these cultures in order to obtain a more adequate understanding of their matriarchal character.

#### **4. Giving two examples from Asia**

##### **1. Example: The Khasi of Northeast India**

In the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya live the Khasi people, who have maintained many features of their traditional lifestyle up to the present time. ‘Kha-si’ means ‘born from a mother’. The mother is not only the progenitor and head of the clan, but in her role as family priest also embodies a unifying principle. Responsibility for all family rituals lies with her, including the enormously important ceremonies for the ancestors. She is also custodian of all clan property: the communal house and land, and the income from the work of all the clan members. She guides distribution of the common wealth, taking care that it is shared out equally, and according to the needs of each, in a give-and-take economy. Her responsibility is based on natural bonds, not on abstraction. In the clan house, among her close relatives she enjoys a natural authority, rather than a power over others.

All the Khasi groups follow the matrilineal principle of descent, succession and inheritance. That means, the children carry the name of the mother’s clan and are members of it. Today the father’s clan is also recognized, and is honored; however, the father’s lineage plays no role, as many of the Khasi continue to emphasize matrilineal kinship and solidarity. With the Khasi it is the youngest daughter, or ‘Ka Khatduh’, who takes over the entire ancestral property as well as the spiritual responsibility for the clan: it is the principle of ‘ultima-geniture’. She is supported by her eldest maternal uncle, who carries out the actual management of the clan property following the consensus of all clan members.

Matrilocality is still common with the Khasi peoples, meaning that the direct offspring live in the house of the mother, even after they are grown up. A Khasi household usually consists of the grandmother, her daughters and sons, and the daughters' children living under one roof. These houses are not very large, and they are plain and unadorned; at the center is always the mother's hearth.

For men, as sons, brothers or maternal uncles, 'home' is in the house of the Ka Khatduh, the clan mother. Traditional men live their whole lives there, working in the clan's fields. They go to the market, or off on the hunt, but turn over all the products of their efforts to the clan mother.<sup>4</sup> As spouses they are sometimes working in their wife's houses as long as they like to live there, which usually is not too long. For the traditional Khasi-Pnar, divorce is just as casual as marriage. All it takes is a simple gesture of I-don't-like-you-anymore on the part of both spouses, and the partners separate. She stays in her mother's house, or in her own, while he goes back to his mother's house. After separation or divorce – which must not be necessarily legal, but recognized by neighbors and relatives – one can marry again; no prohibition is there to a number of times one can marry.

Following from this matrilineal system, men traditionally have no significant role as husbands and are not acknowledged as fathers – recognition of the father's lineage is probably a later development. This is not because the man is valued less, but because, in a matriarchal clan, he is not related to his spouse's children. His parental role is, as the next-closest relative, of his sisters' children, because he has the same clan name as they have. He is the social father of his sisters' children and the co-priest in family matters; as such he enjoys great respect in the clan.

The local traditional institution of council meetings is an all-men gathering. But the clan house is the basic political unit, where decisions are made by consensus in the family council, which then sends out senior male clan members to represent them in the broader councils. Within these traditional political patterns, every man on the councils is, above all, the son of his mother, or the brother of his sister. Every council meeting takes place only with the consensual agreement of the women: without their agreement, no decision can be made. The British colonial government later superimposed a district council, which is a formal justice institution; this took away from the local councils the power to settle cases by consensus.<sup>5</sup>

The Khasi-Pnar, the most traditional Khasi, have no religion in the patriarchal sense of the term, with an organized theology and church. The most striking of their beliefs is the honoring of the female and male ancestors and the associated elaborate ceremonies for them. This is no simple 'cult', but rather a unique form of religious thinking that relates to belief that one will be reborn into one's own clan. Connected with the honoring of the ancestors is the Khasi megalithic culture. Faced with these menhirs and dolmens, English researchers were led to make the astonishing statement that they felt right at home! For the Khasi, the megalithic stones embody the ancestors for whom they were built; in this form they can forever stay among the living, even if 'petrified'. The ancestors are called upon to bless and protect the clan.

Following naturally from the worship of female ancestors, it developed into the most ancient form of a mother goddess-worship. The ceremonial grounds for the religious festivals used to be the sacred megalithic stones; in earlier times all the festivals took place there. Today the ceremonies have been moved to the village

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<sup>4</sup> Gurdon, *ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Mukhim, *ibidem*.

squares or the clan houses. The religious system based on ancestor worship is ancient; in it we can recognize the earliest form of spiritual beliefs.

So far, this has been a description of the general situation in traditional Khasi culture. In 1826, the situation underwent a dramatic change. The Khasi peoples were overtaken and disarmed by British military forces. Although they were not required to perform colonial service, they lost their autonomy. The British military were followed by English missionaries, who had been (and have not stopped) trying to convert the Khasi. Today, at least 60 % of Khasi are Christians, and because of this, we know very little about the so-called 'heretical' non-Christian Khasi belief in re-birth, and very little about their goddesses. <sup>6</sup> Khasi men that the British were in contact with developed an unprecedented power in the local councils and district councils. A one-family house and a nuclear family structure managed by men was encouraged, a practice that destroyed the matriarchal clan structure and permitted the leaching away of women's rights.

## 2. Example: The Mosuo of Southwest China

In China, the so-called 'marginal peoples' - which, after all, did not originate in the margins but rather were pushed there - comprise some 800 tribes totalling around 15 millions of people.<sup>7</sup> None of them are Chinese, which is why they are not referred to here by the Chinese-centered label 'marginal cultures', but as the 'indigenous peoples' of China.

In 1993, I led an all-women research trip, under the auspices of the International Academy HAGIA into this region to the Mosuo, who are living on Lake Lugu and in the surrounding mountains and the nearby mountain valley of Yongning. On Lake Lugu the Mosuo live from fishing, and in the Yongning valley, from agriculture. Most of their clans are still matriarchal: they are fully matrilineal, and daughters and sons live in their mother's clan house; their residence is matrilineal. The most capable woman is elected to be head, or matriarch. She organises the agricultural work and distributes the food; she manages the clan's communal property, which is handed over to her, she takes care of the guests and is the house priestess at all family ceremonies. She has, however, no special privileges that would contravene the principle of equality on which these societies are based, since she works just as hard as other family members do, and they all discuss the important events together. Until recently, the matriarchs of the different clans also held important positions in the village councils as well.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For the dissolution and destruction of traditional Khasi culture by European colonialism see Bareh, *ibid.*; P. Roy: „Christianity and the Khasi“, in: *Man in India*, 44, Ranchi 1964, Catholic Press; N. Natarajan: *The Missionary among the Khasi*, Gauhati, Assam, 1977, Sterling. – Both authors are educated Christians who write naively, and approvingly, of the disappearance of traditional Khasi culture.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the 800 marginalized peoples of China, see: W. Eberhard: *Lokalkulturen im Alten China*, Leiden 1942, Brill.

<sup>8</sup> For this and the following discussion see, besides my own research, the work of the Chinese anthropologist Ruxian Yan: "The Kinship System of the Mosuo in China" (pp. 230-239); the indigenous Mosuo anthropologist Lamu Gatusa (Shi Gaofeng): "Matriarchal Marriage Patterns of the Mosuo People of China" (pp. 240-248); and the indigenous Mosuo researcher Danshilacuo (He Mei): "Mosuo Family Structures" (pp.

Today, the Mosuo practice a very open form of marriage, the 'visiting marriage'. The young people mutually choose each other for a short or longer time, and in the course of a lifetime, no one has just one love relationship. The connection is made easily, through a simple exchange of gifts at a special dance festival for the Mosuo goddess Gan mu. Breaking up is just as easy: either the young woman refuses to let her lover come into her room, or he simply stops coming to see her. The partners in these loose associations assume no rights or duties - women remain in their mothers' houses, while men, regardless of age and status, go back and forth between their mother's clan house and their lover's clan house in 'visiting marriage'. Children always live with their mothers, and the responsibility for mutual aid lies not between marriage partners, but among the members of the same clan. Sometimes a lover moves into the clan house of his sweetheart for a limited time, particularly if her family lacks sons, to help with the work in the fields. If a family lacks daughters, girls may be adopted from a distantly related clan.

In Mosuo life, the initiation ceremonies, especially the ones for girls, are the main religious festivities. At the initiation the girl's mother dresses her for the first time in the garments of a young, grown-up Mosuo woman, and she is presented with a key to her own room. The clothes have more than just traditional significance: during the numerous rituals for the burial of an old woman, one detail especially stood out - among the offerings for her journey to the Otherworld, there was a young woman's traditional costume, just like the one given to the initiate. Asked about this, the dead woman's grieving brother simply answered that "She would soon come back to us as a young woman".

The belief in rebirth is key to these ceremonies: though every dead person returns to the ancestors (who live in the northern sky), this is just to position them to come back as small children into their own clan houses.

In spite that the older, indigenous religion of the Mosuo has been plastered over with Tibetan Lamaism, the people are basically loyal to their ancient religion, relating to nature: mountains and springs, gorges and fields are sacred places. Lake Lugu is sacred to them as well - it is their Mother Lake. The beautiful Gan mu, the mountain that rises up from the Lugu Lake's shore, is their highest goddess. The Mosuo make pilgrimages to this mountain once a year, to hold a great dance celebration honoring the goddess.

Today the situation among this people is rapidly changing. We experienced this first-hand: the villages on Lake Lugu were opened up by the central government to Chinese male mass tourism; this brought with it a money economy and increasing family conflicts to this kind people. It amounts to the selling off of their culture and the public humiliation of Mosuo women, who are seen as being sexually free for the taking. Additionally, conditions for agricultural activities are becoming ever harder, as the hunger for raw materials of the Chinese industry in the lowlands drives deforestation in the mountain regions. We saw the results of this clearcutting - barren, dessicated hills and limestone-crustrated valleys. As a consequence, the Mosuo culture, thousands of years old, is seriously threatened.

## A last remark

Anyway, we can see that matriarchal patterns, be it in a small society or in a large one which includes several tribes or societies, are complex. The complexity of those large matriarchal structures is even vaster and more striking than those of patriarchal states. There, hierarchical pressure from above keeps everything – and everyone – in line, while matriarchal peoples base even their largest structures in the equal value of every member. In this, and in their fundamentally peace-oriented politics, matriarchal societies can serve as important models for future societies, beyond patriarchy. --

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## Biographical Note

Heide Goettner-Abendroth is a philosopher and researcher on culture and society, focused on matriarchal studies. She is a mother and grandmother.

She took her Ph.D. in philosophy of science at the University of Munich and taught philosophy for ten years there. In 1980 she was visiting professor at the University of Montreal/Canada and, in 1992, at the University of Innsbruck/Austria.

In 1986 she founded the independent "International Academy HAGIA for Matriarchal Studies" in Germany, and since then has been its director.

She lectured worldwide and has published various books on matriarchal society and culture, and has become a founder of modern Matriarchal Studies.

In 2003, she organized and guided the 1. World Congress on Matriarchal Studies in Luxembourg and, in 2005, the 2. World Congress on Matriarchal Studies in Texas/USA. In 2011, she guided a big conference on Matriarchal Studies and Matriarchal Politics in Switzerland.

She is one of the women across the globe who have been nominated by the worldwide initiative „1000 Women for the NobelPeacePrize 2005“.

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