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Matriarchal Spirituality, Past and Present

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Introduction

The meaning of “matri-archy”

Non-patriarchal societies have different social structures than patriarchal ones; these structures distinguished by certain characteristics that are called “matriarchal”. In no way do they validate the common misapprehension that women have the last word in matriarchies, or that they rule over others. No serious researcher has ever expressed anything like this. Instead, these prejudices reflect the unexamined assumption that matriarchal societies would be organised just like patriarchal ones, but with women, instead of men, in the central roles.

We, however, do not need to be reticent about the using the term “matri-archy”, for it is in no way equivalent to the term “patri-archy”. The word “archy” derives from Greek “arché” which has two meanings: “domination” and “beginning”. The meaning of “beginning” is obvious in such terms as “archangel”, “Noah’s ark”, or “archetype”.

For clarity sake, “patriarchy” must be translated as “domination of the fathers”, while “matriarchy” means “in the beginning, the mothers”. This is the heart of the matter! Because, in terms of cultural history, matriarchies are much older than patriarchies, having developed rather late; while matriarchies are the origin of the history of cultures. Furthermore, matriarchies understand that mothers are the origin, or beginning, of each living being, and these cultures have transformed this natural fact into a cultural pattern.

In the case of the term „matriarchy“, its adequate re-definition would be a great advantage, especially for women: **reclaiming** this term means for women of today to reclaim the knowledge about women-centered societies all over the world.

Modern Matriarchal Studies

Modern Matriarchal Studies is concerned with re-defining this term and with researching matriarchal societies in past and present. With my lifelong research on matriarchal societies, I am the founder of this new field of knowledge – which now has been expanded upon by many others. It was first presented to a broader international public at two world congresses: in Luxembourg in 2003, and in the USA in 2005 – events that were organized and guided by me.

The research I undertook on certain matriarchal societies in existence in Asia, Africa and the Americas, and the Pacific region taught me a great deal. In those cultures, my investigations focused on economic, social, political and spiritual patterns – and as my work progressed, it became more and more obvious that these are deeply sacred societies: they are goddess cultures. They cannot be fully understood unless without delving into their spirituality.

This was a plunge that changed my life. With every discovery I made as a scholar, there came a spiritual discovery within me. In this way, my own international research led me to matriarchal spirituality – so these cultures were my teachers. From the time I started the International Academy HAGIA in nineteen-eighty-six (1986), the approach was that matriarchal research would be taught, and matriarchal spirituality practiced – because for me, they were inseparable. Over the years, many women from every German-speaking country have taken part in this work, and have passed it on. The matriarchal spirituality we celebrate in the Academy has now become an important source for the women’s spirituality movement in these countries.

Though we celebrate goddesses from all over the world, our emphasis has been on worship of Mother Earth in all her various forms and guises, and in her interaction with her cosmic sisters, the planets. She is the mother who bears and nurtures all of us, and is our home in the cosmos. Most modern people act as if they have forgotten this – as if everything revolves around them. But the Earth is the foundation for us all and gives us – like nothing else can – something in common. We are all her daughters and sons, and the animals and plants are our brothers and sisters through Her.

Matriarchal Spirituality, Past and Present

1. Matriarchal societies

Modern Matriarchal Studies puts an end to the common prejudice that matriarchy means “women’s rule”. It’s true that in patriarchal societies women are ruled by men. But matriarchal societies are in no way the simple reversal of this scenario. In matriarchies, women are at the center of culture without ruling over other members of society. The aim is not to have power over others and over nature, but to nurture the natural, social and cultural life based on mutual respect.

Therefore matriarchal societies, based on a non-violent social structure, exist without the exploitation of humans, animals and nature. All living creatures are respected as diverse children of Mother Earth. Matriarchies have a social structure that follows the value of “motherliness” in the broadest sense: they are based on the values of nurturing and caring instead of competition and domination. This brings forth *gender egalitarian* patterns in all of those societies, and in most of the cases matriarchal societies exist without hierarchies and classes, so they are *fully egalitarian*. Their economic principles foster a gift economy, in the sense that they constantly adjust the level of individual wealth by circulating vital goods,

which are given away as gifts at their numerous festivals. Their political decisions are made by consensus; this is true not only at the level of families and clans, but also at the level of villages, towns and the entire region. All this is grounded in insightful and carefully conceived principles and social guidelines that ensure a peaceful life for all.

All of these matriarchal principles and patterns have deep spiritual roots; and can only be actualised and maintained through a comprehensive spiritual worldview.

2. A Different Understanding of the Divine

In traditional matriarchal cultures, the divine is understood to be immanent in nature and culture; this is the reason why everything is considered sacred. There is no transcendent God outside of the world, but the *world itself is divine*, feminine divine. There is evidence for this idea in the ancient belief in the two primordial goddesses, the Earth and the Universe. The cosmic primordial Goddess is the creatrix who gave birth to everything in existence. The earth is considered to be the other primordial Goddess; she is the Great Mother of all living beings. Both mirror the matriarchal perception that the feminine is the all-encompassing energy.

Out of this all-encompassing feminine principle everything else develops in dynamic polarity. Such polar pairs are, for example, light and darkness, summer and winter, movement and stillness, female and male. In matriarchy, this complementary equivalence is not evaluated in any way – that happened later, in dualistic patriarchal philosophies. In fact, the world is seen as “whole” when all of the two polarities are in perfect balance.

3. Everyday Life and Holy-days in a “Sacred World”

Since all elements and beings are of divine origin, everything is sacred. What does this mean for everyday life? There is no strict separation between “everyday life” – when one is working, and “holy-days” – when one is engaged in devotional practice and is not working. In matriarchies as sacred societies, every shared activity – such as tilling, sowing, harvesting, cooking, weaving, building a house – is a ritual with deep significance; and each everyday object – such as a plough, a spindle, a storage jar, a hearth –also has symbolic meaning. Work itself is not just narrowly focused on profit – which makes it exhausting and alienating in patriarchal civilization – but is meant to express the joy of life in all its aspects. Therefore, work is honoured and performed as a ritual.

These ritualised everyday activities are highlighted during the numerous festivals, when they are turned into great ceremonies and sacred dramas in which the whole village or community participates. Here again, everything that is celebrated is already present in daily life. Matriarchal peoples do not celebrate transcendent gods, or saints elevated high above normal human beings. They celebrate the diversity of the real world in which they find themselves embedded. They celebrate what surrounds them, who they are and what they do. Therefore their spiritual activity is part of their everyday lives as much as it is part of their holy-days.

4. Matriarchal Festivals: Mirror of Society and Nature

Thus matriarchal spirituality is not based on abstractions: holy books, dogmas and theologies are unknown. It lives in the great matriarchal festivals, and its entire meaning can be read in those festivals. The feasts have great spiritual richness, demonstrating enormous complexity in their rituals and ceremonies. They represent the cultural heart of each village, town, or

ethnic community, and present a structure that includes all aspects of life. They reflect the social patterns between the genders, and among the generations, and the clans.

So matriarchal peoples celebrate themselves, the genders, and the generations, all of which are expressions of the divine. Children and youth are celebrated in festivals of initiation. The adults are celebrated in festivals of sacred marriage, a ceremony that symbolically joins all the polarities of the world. The older people, especially the elder women as clan mothers, are celebrated in festivals of merit; and following these are the great festivals for the ancestors, especially the female ancestors.

Furthermore, the festivals resonate with matriarchal economics, history, and calendar, and – most fundamentally – with the relationship humans have to the natural world. For them, the natural world is the embodiment of the Goddess. The cyclical seasonal festivals are the basis for celebrating the ever-changing appearance of nature, which is understood to include not just the immediate surroundings, but the whole earth and the cosmos.

5. Matriarchal Festivals: Calendar and Historical Chronicle

Matriarchal economics becomes visible through the festivals, in both practical and symbolic ways. On the practical level, they drive the matriarchal economy of gift giving and reciprocating, while on the symbolic level they represent the calendar of the agricultural year. The great festivals of the seasons are at once festivals of sowing, of germination and growth, of harvest and decay. They represent an agrarian calendar based on astronomical observations.

Matriarchal peoples do not need history books, for they can read their history – and the histories of their founding clan mothers – through their festivals. These events are portrayed as symbolic scenes, as the story of their own societal development. This way of conveying history is enlivening, not boring: it is colourful, dramatic, and turbulent – and participation is allowed. History, therefore, is not just about the past; but is a process that is being worked on in the present through participation in the rituals.

The most remarkable attribute of matriarchal spirituality is its great tolerance. As the primordial Goddess Earth, the mother of all peoples, is “The One with the Thousand Faces”, it is only natural that she will also be honoured in a thousand different specific forms. For example, a mountain people will worship her in the shape of a Mountain Goddess, and people living by the sea will worship her as a Sea Goddess. In spite of this diversity, which is considered to be a great wealth, the awareness of the primordial Goddess’s unity is never lost. But she is never an abstract unity; she is a Goddess one can see and touch, therefore there is no need for anyone to convert others to a specific understanding of the Goddess.

This matriarchal tolerance is so expansive that it even integrates, in some cases, the gods of patriarchal religion, such as Jesus and Mary, and the indigenous people say: “because the missionaries liked it that way”.

6. Matriarchal Tolerance today

Tolerance is highly valued in traditional matriarchal societies, and this can teach us a lot in the modern world. Matriarchal tolerance is already on the way, for in many contemporary movements people have abandoned religions that claim to have exclusive access to God or to the “truth”, or an exclusive route to holiness. For these modern seekers, traditional patriarchal

religions have also lost spiritual credibility – due to their close links to dominator patterns such as hierarchies and punishment, as well as to secular rulers and governments.

Matriarchal spirituality is not a religion or a theology; it is not confined to an official church, or an exclusive temple, or a synagogue, or a mosque. It has no holy books that make exclusive truth claims. No one has to believe something that makes no sense to them. Religious competition, intolerance and missionary zeal are not imaginable in such a worldview; so-called holy wars have no basis, and they don't happen.

Matriarchal spirituality embodies the continuous celebration of this world, and of life in all its diversity. In order to express this, languages of symbols have developed over millennia; these are languages that have served as the foundation for various later religions' symbolic systems across the globe. Matriarchal symbolic languages do not demand blind faith, because the images are self-explanatory as images of cosmos and earth, and of life.

7. New Matriarchal Festivals as the new Center of Life

It is a matter of fact that many women (and men) of today practise matriarchal spirituality in their everyday life, and celebrate matriarchal seasonal festivals. They already use matriarchal symbolic languages in a variety of ways. This free and creative worship of Mother Earth and various goddesses could soon be driving the formation of spiritual affinity groups, symbolic matri-clans, and new communities, which tend to form the basic units of new matriarchal societies.

As people begin to see each other in this spiritual context, their specific roles and qualities as different individuals, genders, and generations can be seen in the light of a Goddess gift. This has a healing and integrating effect – for oneself, for the relationship with others. This is brought about not through theoretical, moralistic discussion, but by creative play.

The most important relationship is the one between humans and earth. So the cosmos and the earth in general, as well as the specific place where a new symbolic matri-clan or community lives – the local “Face of Mother Earth” – are all worthy of the most elaborate festivals. For we can hardly connect with the earth in spirit, soul and body if we don't celebrate her, as matriarchal peoples did and still do. This has the power to also heal the injuries perpetrated on all forms of life on earth by patriarchal patterns and societies.

We can heal Mother Earth by touching her lovingly and by portraying her, and we enhance her beauty with our own beautiful festive appearance, as well as with the festivals themselves. Because we are a part of her, she then becomes visible to herself, through our eyes, and comes into her own consciousness when we enjoy her beauty. For, “through us, nature beholds her own beauty” – according to the German philosopher Schelling. Or as the more recent philosopher John Seed says, we are the part of the earth that evolved eyes and then consciousness, allowing Mother Earth to see and enjoy herself.

This is the matriarchal dialogue with the Goddess inside us and around us. To conduct this dialogue results in a re-enchantment of the world, which is just another expression for making the world sacred and peaceful again._

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