

Heide Goettner-Abendroth

Matriarchal Studies: Past Debates and Present New Foundation

1. Two questions at the beginning

The misinterpretation of the concept “matriarchy” as “rule of mothers or women” has led hundreds of scholars operating within the patriarchal framework to adhere to this fiction in their citations; some even consider it good style to constantly parade this misconception like a mantra. Other scholars have combed through the historical and ethnological record with smug irony, searching far and wide for such societies and of course not finding any.

This shows that the definition of “matriarchy” as “rule of mothers” is an empty one, which can neither be used nor cited. How is it possible to do scholarly work without ever having defined the area under discussion properly?

The other fundamental question here is, how can anyone know anything with certainty about matriarchy, and how can one define it at all if this subject is pushed to the margins and buried in prejudices? What are the methods to redefine it based on fact, not ideology?

2. Past Debates

Traditional matriarchy scholarship has existed for a long time beginning in 1861 with Johann Jakob Bachofen’s work on *Mother Right*.¹ Short before that, the anthropological-ethnological field of matriarchal studies was initiated by Henry Lewis Morgan.² 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 this process the topic was used and misused from

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

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

the most various viewpoints by philosophical schools and political movements.³

Astonishing in these various works on the topic mother right or matriarchy is the lack – despite good collection of material – of a scientific definition and philosophical 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 retrojections of bourgeois-patriarchal conditions onto early cultural history, similar to the projections in anthropology onto non-Western indigenous societies – a situation that makes many so-called “research findings” worthless. This is why all of traditional matriarchy research rests on a shifting foundation.

3. Feminist and Indigenous Matriarchal Studies

A turning point is indicated by the fact that in the past few decades, feminist and indigenous researchers, for the most part women, have taken the investigation of matriarchal forms of society into their own hands. Their work stands in stark contrast to traditional research on matriarchy. These feminist and indigenous approaches assert the right to proceed on their own terms, and have developed a very different perspective on society and history.

Awake and self-aware, feminist and indigenous women researchers have questioned patriarchal and colonialist – i. e., sexist and racist – thought patterns. Therefore, they are best prepared to recognize the particulars of matriarchal societies as a women-centered form of society, because:

First of all, they have no trouble seeing women as acting subjects in history and in society – an approach that patriarchally influenced researchers have a great deal of trouble with.

Further on, they are able – more so than men are – to apprehend the conditions, social effects and symbolic images of motherhood, as well as the values of mothering, which in matriarchies play a structuring role.

Last but not least, this issue of access is becoming particularly important in ethnographic research on existing matriarchal societies.

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

Female anthropologists have an easier time making contact with women of matriarchal cultures, and this is particularly true when the anthropologist has a feminist orientation. This new point of view is being decisively advanced by indigenous women researchers, whose research within their own matriarchal societies looks farthest and most deeply, in a way that could never be possible for outsiders to do.

Therefore, feminist and indigenous matriarchal studies are necessarily always dedicated to one degree or another to critiques of patriarchy. All together, this means a change of perspective so radical that research on matriarchy has come far from its beginnings in traditional theories and approaches to arrive at a new turning point of great significance.

4. Modern Matriarchal Studies

However, its beginnings were hampered by lay researchers' naive, non-methodical approach. Although there were many interesting ideas in these proceedings, it shows that just talking about matriarchy is not the same as giving this field of knowledge a scientific, empirically based definition and a philosophical foundation in regard to its methodology and its theoretical framework.

This doesn't begin until the advent of modern Matriarchal Studies that has appeared over the past few decades, and is rapidly undergoing further development. By my own work I took up the task of providing the field of matriarchy research with a philosophical foundation which entails three requirements:

- first, formulating an *empirically grounded, adequate definition* of "matriarchy" capable of grasping the deep structure 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, thereby grasping the great breadth of matriarchal societal forms systematically and with sensitivity.

Now I will explain in short these three requirements for giving a foundation to matriarchal studies:

The first requirement for modern Matriarchal Studies was fulfilled when I developed the structural definition of "matriarchy". I made comparative studies of as many currently existing societies of this kind

as possible in order to find their common denominators on all societal levels. That is, the new definition of “matriarchy” was not produced in abstraction and thus projected onto the field of study. Instead, it was developed step by step through an analytical understanding of these societies.

To summarize here in the most extreme brevity, this definition asserts that “matriarchy”

- on the economic level, is a society of balanced economic reciprocity, in which women manage essential goods such as land, houses, and food. But they have no right of ownership, but of distribution, and they pay constant attention to balancing the economy through equal distribution. Such an economy has the qualities of a “gift economy”⁴;
- on the social level, (matriarchy) is a non-hierarchical society of matrilineal kinship, whose main features are clan organization based on matrilinearity (kinship in the mother’s line) and matrilocality (residence with or near the mother); at the same time the sexes are valued equally (gender equality);
- on the political level, (matriarchy) represents a society of consensus, with the political basis in the clan houses - where decision making takes place - and with a system of male delegates to the diverse councils outside; this gives the men no power to decide over others, but gives them their own sphere of activity and social status. In most cases, this system results not only in a gender-egalitarian society, but also in a fully egalitarian society;
- on the cultural level, (matriarchy) is based on a sacred culture in which there are no aloof male gods, but where the worldview is defined by the feminine divine.

Independently of my comparative work, such a new definition was sketched out by Peggy Reeves Sanday by her studies on the Minangkabau of Sumatra,⁵ and implicitly by Barbara Mann by her investigation on her own indigenous Iroquoian people, focussing on the role of Iroquois women in the traditional society.⁶

⁴ Genevieve Vaughan: *For-Giving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, Austin 1997, Plain View and Anomaly Press); (ed.): *Women and the Gift Economy*, Toronto/Canada 2007, Inanna Publications, York University.

⁵ Peggy Reeves Sanday: *Women at the Center. Life in a Modern Matriarchy*, Ithaca, New York 2002, Cornell University Press.

⁶ Barbara Mann: *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas*, New York 2002, 2004, Peter Lang Publishing.

The second requirement for modern Matriarchal Studies was fulfilled by explicitly specifying a valid methodology for this research. In traditional matriarchal research the methodology was not described anywhere. Very early on I showed that for modern Matriarchal Studies such a methodology must rest on two pillars: a broad interdisciplinarity and a thorough critique of ideology.

Regarding interdisciplinarity, it is obviously necessary in order to understand an entire societal form along with its history. With it we eliminate the fragmentation of knowledge, which arises through breaking it up into the traditional disciplines and thereby obscuring larger connections.

The critique of ideology – what always means patriarchal ideology here – also requires a method, so as not to lose itself once more in obscured ideology. From the very beginning I sketched out such a method and elaborated it later. It identifies the typical prejudices about matriarchy found everywhere in the scholarly literature – up to the point of self-contradiction. Interdisciplinarity is very advantageous here, because comparisons of expert opinions from various disciplines – or even within a single discipline – reveal incomplete, one-sided, and distorted representations.

The third requirement for modern Matriarchal Studies is the development of a theoretical framework for this field. It began as a research program and was carried out in steps:

In the first step of developing the matriarchy theory I provided an overview of previous studies of matriarchy up to the present.

In the second step of developing the theory of matriarchy I formulated the new and adequate definition of “matriarchy” from a vast amount of anthropological material. Here we see the important place of anthropology, since it is impossible to arrive at a complete definition of “matriarchy” from cultural history alone. There we have only remnants and fragments of past societies yielding only scattered bits of information and no longer providing a complete picture.

The third step in developing the theory of matriarchy is taking the full definition of “matriarchy” gained in this way as a scientific tool and using it to address cultural history. In the “light of theory” a new perspective will open leading to a complete revision of human history.

The fourth step in developing the theory of matriarchy deals with the problem of patriarchy's origin. Here it must be answered how patriarchal patterns were first able to establish themselves at different times under different conditions in different parts of the world. Second, how were patriarchal societies able thereafter to spread throughout the world? The rise of patriarchy everywhere was not at all self-evident, and it was a long process, lasting throughout the patriarchal millenia up to the present time.

A theory of matriarchy includes all of this, and so it entails a complete change of perspective on society and history or, in other words, a change of paradigm. A paradigm needs to leave gaps in its early stages, because it is not the role of a paradigm to act as a lexicon. Then it can be taken up by other researchers for their own studies and developed further. So I hope that generations of scholars will continue to work creatively with the paradigm of modern Matriarchal Studies for as long as it takes to incorporate this view of the world into general public awareness.

www.goettner-abendroth.de

www.hagia.de