

Heide Goettner-Abendroth

SOCIETIES IN BALANCE.

Re-thinking “Matriarchy” in Modern Matriarchal Studies

(Center of Intercultural Studies, Ottawa/Canada, Conference 2017)

1. On Modern Matriarchal Studies¹

I was well aware that the discussion on “matriarchy” had a long tradition in German-speaking Europe, going back as far as the work of J. J. Bachofen, which came out in 1861.² It represents a perfect parallel to the work of H. L. Morgan, who did research on the matriarchal society of the Iroquois of his time (1851).³

For more than a century, the discussion on “mother right” and “matriarchy” continued: the subject now was used and abused by all the intellectual schools of thought, and all political parties, each with its distinctly different point of view. What worried me most about this reception of Bachofen’s and Morgan’s ideas was the complete lack of a clear definition of the matter at hand, and furthermore, the huge amount of emotion and ideology that was involved in the discussion. This combination of lacking definitions and excessive emotionality continued till today.

After these insights, I decided – building on my tools as a philosopher of science – to give Matriarchal Studies, i.e. the research into all forms of non-patriarchal societies in both past and present, a modern scientific foundation. That means:

¹ See for the philosophical-scientific foundation of modern Matriarchal Studies, Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies*, General Introduction.

² Johann Jakob Bachofen: *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, Princeton, N.J., 1967, Princeton University Press, (first edition 1861 in German: *Das Mutterrecht*).

³ Henri Lewis Morgan: *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois*, 1851 und 1871/1877, H.M.Lloyd, New York 1901.

- first, the formulation of an increasingly precise definition of „matriarchy“, one that outlines the deep structure of this form of society;
- second, the development of a methodology capable of adequately presenting the area under investigation, in this case, matriarchal societies; it is based on interdisciplinarity and a serious critique of patriarchal ideology;
- third, the development of a theoretical framework that encompasses the vast historical and geographic extent of matriarchal social forms.

This was necessary, because clearly formulated, consistent theories are highly efficient intellectual tools, which can be used by all interested researchers.

In that way, *modern* Matriarchal Studies came into being, in contrast to traditional research on matriarchal societies, and it was promoted at once by feminist and indigenous scholars.⁴

2. The deep structure of matriarchal society

Nevertheless, thanks to the method of ideological criticism of patriarchy, I found abundant evidence for the existence of matriarchal patterns. To find the much needed clear and adequate definition of them, I was obliged to understand the fundamentals of certain indigenous societies of this type. So the definition developed step by step inductively from my cross cultural research all over the world. In that way, the deep structure of matriarchal society slowly emerged on the four levels of society: at the economic, social, political, and cultural level.⁵

These matriarchal patterns provide us with a radically different cultural model, based on radically different values. Matriarchies are mother-centered societies, that means, they are based on maternal values: care-taking, nurturing, need-orientation, resolving conflicts by negotiation and without violence, developing skills of peace building. These values hold for everybody: mothers and non-mothers, women and men alike.

At the social level, matriarchal societies are based on the clan. People live together in large kinship groups, formed according to the principle

⁴ Heide Goettner-Abendroth(ed.): *Societies of Peace. Matriarchies Past, Present and Future (Selected papers of the First and Second World Congresses on Matriarchal Studies 2003 and 2005)*, Toronto 2009, Inanna Press, York University.

⁵ Heide Goettner-Abendroth: *Matriarchal Societies. Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*, New York 2012/2013, Peter Lang Publishing.

of *matrilineality*. The clan's name, and all social status and political titles, are passed on through the mother's line. The clan is founded on the maternal values, just mentioned.

But in matriarchies, you don't have to be a biological mother in order to be respected as a "mother," because matriarchies practice the common motherhood of a group of sisters. This motherhood is founded on the freedom of women to decide on their own about whether or not to have biological children.

A matri-clan, or a lineage of a clan, lives in one big clan-house, but there exist also different residence patterns, for ex. with daughters living near the clan-house in houses of their own. It is called *matrilocality*. The women's spouses or lovers stay only over-night, in a pattern called "visiting or walking marriage." This is one form among many others of matrilineal marriage. In any way, the two genders enjoy great freedom in their sexual lives. The principles of matrilineality and matrilocality put mothers at the center; in this way women guide their clans without ruling.

In order to achieve social cohesion among the clans of a village or town, complex marriage conventions have been developed that link them in mutually beneficial ways. The intended effect is that all inhabitants of a village or town are related to each other by birth or by marriage. Thus, on the social level I define matriarchies as **non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of matrilineal kinship**.

At the economic level, matriarchies foster subsistence economies. 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, or the pastures their animals graze. Parcels of land and a certain number of animals are given to each matri-clan, and are worked on communally.

Most importantly, women have the power of disposition over goods and clan houses, and especially over the sources of nourishment: fields, flocks and food. - **This is the important distinction which makes a society a "matriarchal" one, and differentiate it from merely "matrilineal" ones.** - All the goods are put in the hands of the clan mother, the matriarch, and she distributes them equally among her children and grand-children. She is responsible for the sustenance and protection of all clan members.

In a matriarchal community, 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. The members of such a clan give away their

goods as a gift to all their neighbours. By doing this, they gain nothing except honor. At the next festival in the cycle, another lucky clan will step up, outdoing itself in the same way.

Since this is the general attitude, matriarchal economy can be called a “gift economy.” It is the economic manifestation of maternal values, which prevents development of an exchange economy with the accumulation of goods in the hand of the few.⁶

Due to these features, matriarchies can be defined on the economical level as **societies of economic reciprocity, 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. Matters that concern the clan house are decided upon by the women and men in a consensus process, of which the matriarch is the facilitator. Each person has only one vote – even the matriarch – and no member of the household is excluded.

The same applies to decisions concerning the whole village or town. The clan delegates meet together in the village council, but do not make decisions themselves; they simply communicate the decisions that have been made in their clan houses, and move back and forth, until a consensus decision is reached by the whole village. The same applies at the regional level. The delegates move between the local council and the regional council back and forth, until consensus of all the villages and towns in this area is reached.

So I define matriarchies on the political level as **egalitarian societies of consensus.** No domination of one gender over the other and no classes can develop here. This clearly shows how maternal values also permeate political practice.

Such a societal system as matriarchy could not function as a whole without a deep, supporting and all-permeating spiritual attitude. *At the spiritual and cultural level*, matriarchal societies do not have hierarchic religions based on an omnipotent male God. In matriarchies, divinity is

⁶ Genevieve Vaughan: *For-Giving, a Feminist Criticism of Exchange*, Austin 1997, Plain View and Anomaly Press.

immanent, for the whole world is regarded as divine, as feminine divine: the Great Mother Nature.

In such a culture, everything is spiritual. In their festivals, which follow the cycle of the seasons and the cycle of life, everything is celebrated. There is no separation between sacred and secular, therefore the everyday tasks also have ritual significance. In this sense matriarchal societies are sacred ones. In their worldview the entire society must be built in the image of the creative Mother Nature, as they conceptualize Her.

On the cultural level, I define matriarchies as **sacred societies and cultures of the Divine Feminine or Goddess.**

This definition presents not an ideal type, which cannot be changed - as it is in traditional philosophy. It rather is an operative definition, but it could only be outlined here; in my major work it is developed step by step and proved to be much richer.

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 also to consult the histories of these cultures, i.e. to include ethno-history, in order to obtain a more adequate understanding of their matriarchal character.

3. A Word on the term „matriarchy“

The surge of scholarly interest in non-patriarchal social patterns has inspired formation of various new terms for them.

As I have explained, matriarchies are true gender-egalitarian societies, and in most of the cases fully egalitarian societies. This applies to the contributions of both genders - and even though women, especially mothers, are at the center - this principle governs the social functioning and freedom of everybody. Why insist on the sometimes problematic designation, “matriarchy”?

Reclaiming this term means to reclaim knowledge of societies that have been socially, economically, politically and culturally created by women and are founded on maternal values. But there exists a general misunderstanding about the word “matriarchy,” because it looks like a parallel to the word “patriarchy.” So its linguistic background needs to be looked at more carefully. In fact, the Greek word “arché” means not only “domination,” but also “beginning.” The two meanings are distinct,

and cannot be conflated. They are also clearly delineated in English: you would not translate „arche-type“ as „dominator-type,“ but as “primordial type,” nor would you understand „arche-ology“ to be „the teaching of domination,“ but as the knowledge of the earliest cultures. Based on this meaning of “arché,” matriarchy means “the mothers from the beginning.” This refers both to the biological fact that through giving birth, mothers engender the beginning of life, and to the cultural fact that they also created the beginnings of culture itself. On the contrary, “patriarchy” means “domination by the fathers,” which correctly refers to its structures.

This special form of society has been labelled “matrilineal,” “matrifocal,” “matristic,” or “gylanic.” Instead of elaborating a clear definition of what “matriarchal” means, scholars tried to find substitute concepts – but these are rather weak, inadequate and arbitrary. Some of these terms, like “matrifocal” and “gylanic,” are very artificial and have no connection to popular language. Others like “matricentric” and “matristic” are too weak, for they suggest that non-patriarchal societies have no more to them than just being centered around the mothers. The result can be a somewhat reduced view of these societies, a view that neglects the complex social, economical and political networks that characterize these cultures.

In my opinion, the term “matri-cultures” is problematic, too. There exists no definition what it means. At best, the term “matri-cultures” can be used as a generic term, but it lacks clarity. It includes different kinds of societies, for ex. matrilineal cultures (where only matrilineality is left, but the economy is in the hands of men) and matriarchal cultures (where besides matrilineality, the economy is in the hands of women), and others. Each of these forms of cultures must be defined on its own, which a generic term like “matri-cultures” cannot provide.

The greatest advantages of the term “matriarchy” is that it is well known from the discussion that has gone on since Bachofen, and it is by now a popular term – what cannot be said in favor of the surrogate concepts. Philosophical and scientific re-definitions mostly refer to well-known words and re-define them. After that, scholars can work with them, but they do not lose contact with the language of the people. By the re-defining activities of scholars, the word often takes on a new, clearer and broader meaning even in the popular language. Concerning the term “matriarchy,” this re-definition would be a great advantage, especially because for women *reclaiming* this term means to reclaim the knowledge about mother-centered cultures, which provide a completely different model of life. So, to use the term “matriarchy” in its re-defined, clarified meaning is also of political relevance.

www.goettner-abendroth.de

www.hagia.de