

Heide Goettner-Abendroth

1. What is a „matriarchy“?
2. What means „Matriarchal Politics“?

A note at the beginning

The misinterpretation of the concept “matriarchy” as “rule of mothers or women” has led many of Western 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 anthropological records with smug irony, searching for such societies and of course not finding any.

This shows that the idea and definition of “matriarchy” as “rule of the women” is an empty one, which can neither be used nor cited. How is it possible to talk about this subject without ever having defined the area under discussion based on fact?

1. What is a „matriarchy“?

The answer to this question means to develop a new and adequate definition of “matriarchy”, which is lacking in traditional matriarchal studies everywhere.

It is clear that this is not possible from the perspective of Western anthropology alone, but that indigenous societies of this kind are of utmost importance to show us the way. Learning from them we can begin to understand “matriarchy” better, which also means, to understand their societal patterns better.

Therefore, 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 whom I was happy to meet at several opportunities. That is, the new definition of “matriarchy” was not produced in abstraction and, then, projected onto the field of study. Instead, it was developed inductively, step by step, through analytical observation and continued communication with people from these societies.

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. That means, matriarchal societies are consciously built upon 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. Thus, 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 pattern more closely:

At the social level, matriarchal societies are based on the clan. 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 or close to it, and the clan's name, 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. Following from this, matriarchies can be defined 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 right of disposition over goods and clan houses, and especially over the sources of nourishment. All the goods are put in 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.

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 and give away their goods as gifts to all their neighbours, and this is the general attitude for each clan. Due to these features, matriarchies can be defined 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 organized in a system of councils. The basis of each decision-making is the clan house and clan council 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 back and forth between the local council and the regional council until consensus of the village or the whole region is reached.

The result of these practices is that matriarchies can be defined 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 spirituality. ***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 earth as the Great Mother who created everything living.

In such a culture, everything is spiritual and celebrated in rituals and ceremonies. Every social, economic and political action is informed by the principle of the encompassing maternal attitude and maternal values, which are spiritual principles. In this sense matriarchal societies are sacred ones.

On the spiritual level, matriarchies can be defined as ***sacred societies and cultures of the Divine Feminine***.

2. What means „Matriarchal Politics“?

To answer this question means to take a line to the disastrous situation humankind finds itself involved today. It is becoming increasingly clear that we need a radically different cultural model on all levels of society than the destructive patriarchal patterns, which bring humankind ever closer to the brink of extinction.

The matriarchal model is radically different, and it has great significance for our future as women and mothers, and of humankind in general. Therefore, Matriarchal Politics – which is based on modern Matriarchal Studies – provides many ideas and a vision for new mother-centered, egalitarian and peaceful societies, that is, for modern matriarchal societies.

On the social level, the lesson of matriarchies is

- to support and create groups and communities, based on kinship or affinity (traditional or alternative new ones),
- affinity communities whose members feel as “siblings by choice” can form “symbolic clans”, similar to traditional kinship clans,
- these symbolic clans will become matriarchal, if they are initiated and lead by women, according to the needs of mothers and children – and not according to the power games of patriarchally influenced men – for motherhood is the most important function in each society.

Economically, the lesson of matriarchies is

- to create new subsistence economies, based on local and regional units,
- subsistence communities work self-sufficiently and create circles of gift giving,
- mothers are the mainstays of these economic structures, because they support best their families, and in many regions of the world, they still practice it.

On the political level, the lesson is

- to adopt the matriarchal consensus principle which is of utmost importance for egalitarian communities and an egalitarian society,
- to produce a true “grassroots democracy” in that way,
- this can only be practiced up to the regional level, but flourishing and self-sufficient regions are the political aim,
- the big nation states, state unions and super powers are superfluous. They are too big to practice transparent politics of consensus, and they are too small to be able to solve the problems of the damaged biosphere on earth, the polluted soil, water and air.

On the cultural level, matriarchal politics mean

- to leave all hierarchical, male-dominated religions with a claim to the absolute truth,
- instead, the world is regarded as divine again, the Mother of us all, and is treated with care and love,
- everything in the world is respected as sacred,
- matriarchal spirituality infuses everything as an inherent part of everyday life.

If modern matriarchal societies would develop as I am suggesting here, we would not have such a dangerous war which is raging today in the Ukraine and is threatening Europe and other parts of the world. No more wars of conquest, no more civil wars, no more wars out of fear and revenge. We finally would have a completely different situation in the world – which means: peace!

www.hagia.de

www.goettner-abendroth.de