Bachofen redivivus? Female-biased kinship in world history

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Bachofen *Redivivus*?

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On April 25, 2020, *The Guardian* featured an article titled: 'Are female leaders more successful at managing the coronavirus crisis?' New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern and the German *Bundeskanzler* Angela Merkel figured prominently among women leaders who heeded the advice of health specialists and suspended partisan political ambition. Their prudent performance has been contrasted with the calamitous buffoonery of several male leaders, most notably Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro – the topic of another article published by the same newspaper the following day. Does female leadership have the potential to change the face of the world?[1]

The historical record does not provide easy answers: it underlines that sovereignty was defined in terms of masculinity and that women rarely emerged as supreme leaders. Thus, female rule was always framed as the exception. On aggregate, throughout dynastic world history, women found their place on the throne temporarily, acting as regents for minor sons. Motherhood paved the way to power; widowhood and the presence of a male ward convinced others to acquiesce in temporary female sovereignty. Less frequently, princesses ascended the throne with full powers in the absence of male candidates: royal blood made these women more eligible than non-royal men. Male rule was accepted as the default situation, female rule as a last resort. The demise of dynastic power in recent centuries, whether through political marginalization of royals or through the rise of elected presidents, initially strengthened the male monopoly of power. This global changeover was characterized by the political withdrawal of royals

1 Jon Henley and Eleanor Ainge Roy, 'Are female leaders more successful at managing the coronavirus crisis?', *The Guardian*, 25 April 2020: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/why-do-female-leaders-seem-to-be-more-successful-at-managing-the-coronavirus-crisis; Simon Tisdall, 'From Trump to Erdoğan, men who behave badly make the worst leaders in a pandemic', *The Guardian*, 26 April 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/26/trump-to-erdogan-men-who-behave-badly-make-worst-leaders-pandemic-covid-19, both visited 4-5-2020. Clearly there were more sensible male leaders, e.g. Portugal's prime minister António Costa or Greece's Kyriakos Mitsotakis; neither did the leaders of hard-hit Italy and Spain perform poorly. See Duindam, 2019 on women, gender stereotypes, and power in world history.

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– male and female – with their household establishments, by waxing bureaucratic institutions, and by an increasing dominance of representative assemblies. Women acquired the vote only in the early decades of the twentieth century; bureaucracies and parliaments remained overwhelmingly male until long after the Second World War; and no woman held supreme elected office before 1960.

Since the 1960s, the number of women leaders has slowly expanded. Typically, the first female prime minister, Sri Lanka's Sirimavo Bandaranaike, stepped in to replace her husband after he had been assassinated. Among the pioneer generations of women presidents and prime ministers, widows and daughters of assassinated male leaders were a marked presence. The tragic death of a spouse or father was a springboard for their leap to supreme office. Nowadays, women representatives and leaders, more often than their male colleagues, hail from 'political families' – whose family members and affines secured access to elected office in two or more generations. The family name and family connections – a boost for men – apparently make a critical difference in overcoming gender bias for women. Thus, the rise of women representatives in Asian democracies can at the same time be understood as a reinforcement of oligarchical tendencies.[2] Nonetheless, while increasing numbers of women have held the highest political office since the 1980, numerous countries across the globe have yet to elect women to such positions. Female leadership was a recurring anomaly in world history, and the slow march towards political power of women in recent decades shows vestiges of their predicament in the age of dynasty.

Moving from global generalizations to the regional level, some relevant distinctions can be made. Austronesia and Africa show more instances of female leadership than mainland Asia; Europe and the Americas stand midway (Duindam, 2016; Amirell, 2016; Andaya, 2008). In Austronesia and Africa 'female-biased' forms of kinship have been more common than in mainland Asia or Europe. Descent through the female line prohibits direct downward succession of a ruling king's son; succession to office moves sideways, to brothers born of the same royal woman or to sisters' sons. Fatherhood is less important than motherhood. While males still commonly hold supreme power, royal women are active in the highest echelons, can act as king makers, and will in exceptional cases ascend the throne with greater legitimacy. In history, matriliny was the exception, patriliny the norm.[3] Areas with a relatively strong presence of matriliny, show a greater frequency of women in power. Overall, such areas shared the preference for male supreme authority, yet we find kingdoms where talented royal women were preferred over their brethren, clusters of female royalty lasted several

2 See Duindam, 2016 for comparative discussion, examples, and an extensive bibliography

3 These 'unilineal' forms of descent could be combined in many ways for different sections of societies (nobles, commoners; migrant groups) or specific aspects of life (residence, inheritance, succession etc.). Forms combining male and female descent predominate in the record.

generations, and even a single case where women ruled continuously for over two centuries.[4]

The relative strength of women in Africa and Austronesia may be explained in terms of long-term regional differentiation, yet this leaves open the question how and why this differentiation took shape in the first place. Alternatively, the differentiation can be related to changes in the forms of subsistence and social organization, with the predominance of the male line evolving at a later 'stage' in the development of mankind. Following this line of reasoning, 'backwardness' helps to explain the persistence of the female line. As we shall see below, this evolutionary perspective became dominant among anthropologists in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Stumbling over the regional differentiations in the status of women in my effort to write an anthropologically inspired global history of dynastic power, I have recently ventured into this field, far removed from my intellectual comfort zone. A century and a half of perplexing and contradictory scholarship strikes the eye, ranging from speculative armchair anthropology in the 1860s to modern archaeology, paleoanthropology, evolutionary biology, genetics and linguistics. Much of it revolves around the enthusiastic defence, heated refutation, qualified dismissal, or partial acceptance of the notion that, at some point in the early history of mankind, mothers rather than fathers were the main focus of society. Notwithstanding profound changes in academic standards, social settings, and ideologies of the protagonists, contentions pioneered in the 1860s and fiercely repudiated in the course of the twentieth century have resurfaced in our own age. This curious debate and its outcomes deserve closer consideration.

Gynécocratie, matriarchy, matriliny: foundations

Male-defined contours of power made room for the temporary occurrence of merciful mothers on the throne, but typically also engendered a fierce counter-image: warrior-queens, iron maidens, and amazons. These heroic or horrific women, whether they were real or existed only in stories, were perceived as striking contrasts rather than as viable alternatives to male rule. Less spectacular, but still somewhat unsettling, were accounts about peoples where fatherhood was of secondary importance. Herodotus's description of the Lycians ranks among the most famous examples:

> Their way of life is a mixture of Cretan and Carian. One custom which is peculiar to them, and like nothing to be found anywhere else in the world, is

4 I refer here to Buginese queens, clusters of queens in Aceh and Patani, but also in Japan and Korea, in Madagascar and Ndongo-Matamba; the longest-lasting example is that of the Southern African Lovedu rain-queens, a rather complicated story because they were not seen as women. See details in Duindam, 2016; Watson-Andaya, 2008; Amirell, 2011; Hägerdal, 2013.

> that they take their names from their mothers rather than from their fathers. Suppose someone asks his neighbour who he is: he will describe himself in terms of his mother's ancestry—that is, he will list all the mothers on his mother's side. Also, if a female citizen and a male slave live together as a couple, her children are considered legitimate, whereas if a male citizen—even one of the highest rank—marries a woman from another country or a concubine, his children have no rights of citizenship.[5]

After citing this entire passage in his *Moeurs des sauvages Américains: Comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* (Paris 1724), the French Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau (1681-1746) likened the Lycian customs to those of the North American Hurons and Iroquois he had observed:

> C'est dans les femmes que consiste proprement la Nation, la noblesse du sang, l'arbre genéalogique, l'ordre des genérations, & de la conservation des familles [...] c'est dans leurs sang qu'est fondé l'ordre de la succession (Lafitau, 1724: 71-72).

In the second volume of his book Lafitau used the term *gynécocratie* to describe the pattern shared by the Lycians and several North American tribes, arguing that these peoples might have shared a similar origin. In an earlier, primitive phase of mankind, he surmised, gynecocracy must have been the rule (Lafitau, 1724: 162).[6] Previously, the term gynecocracy had usually held negative associations. Two decades after John Knox's famous 1558 diatribe against the 'monstrous regiment of women', the French lawyer Jean Bodin vehemently denounced the rule of women in his *Six Livres de la république*:

> ...la gynécocratie est droitement contre les lois de nature, qui a donné aux hommes la force, la prudence, les armes, le commandement, et l'a ôté aux femmes, et la loi de Dieu a disertement ordonné que la femme fût sujette à l'homme, non seulement au gouvernement des Royaumes et Empires, [mais] aussi en la famille de chacun en particulier (Bodin, 1577: 718).[7]

Lafitau viewed *gynécocratie* in terms of the social centrality of women through descent, inheritance and the family, rather than in its literal meaning of rule

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5 Herodotus, 2008: I no. 73, 77. See a comparable statement by Strabo on the Cantabrians, now using the term gynaecocracy: Strabo, 1949: II, 114-115; book III, 4, 18). Aristotle was probably the first to use the term gynaecocracy, in his discussion of the women of Sparta: Aristotle, 1959, II, vi, (Kessel 1269b 24) 134-135. I thank my colleagues Rolf Strootman and Michel Buijs for tracing this reference (and references to several other authors using the term 'gynecocracy').

6 Latifau, 1724: 165 also stresses the independence of settlements in the Lycian as well as Huron and Iroquois cases. During his travels in the late 1660's John Lederer had earlier noticed the predominance of descent through the female line in North America, see John Lederer, 1672: 8.

7 Jean Bodin, 1577: VI, 5.718, cited here in the modernised abridged 1583 version available on the internet at: http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/bodin_jean/six_livres_republique/bodin_six_livres_republique.pdf (consulted 6 May 2020). Jansen, 2008 discusses the sixteenth-century debate on gynecocracy.

by women. However, he left room for confusion between women wielding sovereign power and the social organization based on motherhood. His evolutionary understanding and typical jumbling of female power and descent through the female line would return with a vengeance in the nineteenth century, with North America and Greece again serving as key examples.

Between 1860 and 1880, an ill-assorted group of savants came to conclusions akin to those of Lafitau. In his famous 1861 *Das Mutterrecht: eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* the Swiss patrician Johann Jakob Bachofen contended that women had held a predominant role in early Greek history. Divine and terrestrial mothers formed the cornerstone of society and religion:

> Zurückgeführt auf Demeters Vorbild wird die irdische Mutter zugleich der tellurischen Urmutter [*tellus mater*, mother earth, JD] sterbliche Stellvertreterin, ihre Priesterin und als Hierophantin mit der Verwaltung ihres Mysteriums betraut (Bachofen, 1897: XIV).

Bachofen delineated a gradual development towards the modern *pater familias*. A first phase of *Hetärismus* was characterized by unconstrained promiscuity, which made it impossible to trace fatherhood. *Mutterrecht* offered a way out of this mix-up: the indubitable connection between mother and child firmly established the prevalence of the female line. Finally, with the appearance of the *Vaterrecht*, priority shifted to the line of the father, paving the way for the family of modern times. Although the *Mutterrecht* neatly matched some of Lafitau's remarks on gynecocracy, notably also the confusion between women-rule and descent in the female line, Bachofen had not consulted the works of the French Jesuit (Davies, 2010: 31; Borgeaud, 1999: 31).

A few years after the publication of the *Mutterrecht*, and without knowledge of the book, the Scottish lawyer John Ferguson McLennan presented similar ideas. In his *Primitive Marriage*, he stated:

> That the most ancient system in which the idea of blood-relationship was embodied, was the system of kinship through females only (McLennan, 1865: 148-149, 154-155).

Female kinship, McLennan argued, developed in tandem with wife capture and exogamy –marriage outside of the own descent group. Like Lafitau and Bachofen, he understood this as a coherent system reflecting a 'primitive' stage, to be succeeded by more 'advanced' forms of social organization.

In the 1870s the American lawyer and anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan appended to these views his knowledge of North American peoples, and used this to systematically relate 'mother right' and 'father right' to specific forms of subsistence and political organization. Morgan argued that female descent was necessarily superseded by the male line after the introduction of property – most notably the presence of 'flocks and herds' (Morgan, 1877: 63, 345). Friedrich Engels, finally, elaborated this point in an essay that pasted his view

of recorded history onto Morgan's larger canvas of savagery, barbarism, and civilization. *Mutterrecht* became dominant in *Wildheit* and persisted throughout *Barbarei*. Patriarchy and private property marked the onset of *Zivilisation*. Engels's typology created a prehistory for the familiar sequence of slavery, feudalism, and capitalism, all placed under the category of *Zivilisation*. Moreover, he evoked the long prevalence of communal property under the conditions of *Mutterrecht*.

> Kommunistischer Haushalt bedeutet aber Herrschaft der Weiber im Hause, wie ausschliessliche Anerkennung einer leiblichen Mutter bei Unmöglichkeit, einen leiblichen Vater mit Gewissheit zu kennen, hohe Achtung der Weiber, d. h. der Mütter, bedeutet (Engels, 1884: 26).

His reading of matriarchy would become a dogma under communist rule in the Soviet Union and China (Nelson, 2004: 97-98).

From the breakdown of consensus to the rebirth of the goddess

Summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of the *Mutterrecht*-thesis in his 1949 *Social Structure*, the anthropologist George Peter Murdock stated:

> So logical, so closely reasoned, and so apparently in accord with all known facts was this hypothesis that from its pioneer formulation by Bachofen in 1861 to nearly the end of the nineteenth century it was accepted by social scientists practically without exception (Murdock, 1949: 185).

The consensus, however, would soon be shattered: this proved to be a thoroughly problematic legacy. First of all, there was little clarity over whether *Mutterrecht* always included matriarchy as well as matriliny. *Gynécocratie* and its German variant used in Bachofen's title suggested the rule of women, yet the historical and anthropological evidence raised grave doubts about this. The British evolutionary anthropologist Edward B. Tylor underlined the distinction, and plausibly argued that there was far more evidence for matriliny than for matriarchy (Tylor, 1896: 81-97).[8] The image of powerful women and mother-goddesses rapidly lost ground among scholars, yet it would retain its capacity to capture audiences in the margins of the academic world.

The overstatement of women in power was only one of the problems in the legacy of these armchair philosophers. Younger generations of anthropologists distanced themselves from two other characteristics: speculative methodology based largely on indirect knowledge and heavy-handed evolutionary schemes. Fieldwork, now part and parcel of the discipline, strengthened the bond between anthropologists and the groups they studied and raised fundamental doubts about

8 See the same distinction between 'mother-right' and 'mother-rule' in Westermarck, 1921: I, 276.

the logic of a gradual and consistent improvement of mankind. The clear-cut association between certain social characteristics and 'stages' of human civilization no longer rang true. Thus, it was underlined, patrilineal and matrilineal customs could be found among peoples living in the simplest circumstances, as well as among socially far more differentiated groups. In post-1900 anthropology, the evolutionist view of *Mutterrecht* became untenable.[9]

What remained was the distinction between groups practicing unilineal descent, yet organized primarily either along patrilineal or matrilineal understandings of descent, usually combined with specific marriage patterns. These mirror images of descent and alliance, often coinciding with patrilocal and matrilocal forms of residence, were no longer unequivocally associated with stages of development.[10] The preponderance of the patriliny arguably had become more marked over time. Indeed, this was perhaps the last remaining association with development, though at an empirical level rather than as a component in a comprehensive model of human evolution: it proved far easier to trace cases of groups changing from matriliny to patriliny than in the opposite direction.

Between 1950 and 1970 a series of strong empirical contributions zoomed in on the special characteristics of matriliny mostly in Africa, North America, and Austronesia, yet without reference to the now obsolete debate on matriarchy. Audrey Richards introduced the idea of the 'matrilineal puzzle', expounding the complications inherent in the split between biological fatherhood and descent in contexts where males held dominant positions – as they usually did. Men shuttled back and forth between their spouse's family with her offspring and their own matrilineal descent group. Wealth and office typically passed from a man to his maternal brothers or to his sisters' sons, rather than to his biological son (Richards, 1950). Inheritance and succession thus created a stronger link with sisters and their offspring than with spouses and their offspring.

A 1961 volume on matrilineal kinship edited by David Schneider and Kathleen Gough combined the results of fieldwork with statistical cross-cultural comparison, providing the ultimate academic alternative for the problematic speculative nineteenth-century *Mutterrecht*-legacy. In a long and detailed final chapter, David Aberle addressed the question 'under what circumstances is matrilineal reckoning likely to arise, to survive, and to disappear?' On the basis of Murdock's *World Ethnographic Sample*, Aberle systematically arrived at a series of lasting hypotheses (Schneider – Gough, 1961).[11] Thus, he related matrilineal descent to certain forms of subsistence (to be discussed below) and argued that it thrived

9 See a balanced discussion providing most relevant arguments from both sides by Murdock, 1931: 653-664. Murdock relied mostly on Rivers, 1924, V, 'Father-right and Mother-right'; see the reasonable assessment in Murdock, 1949: 184-188.

10 I leave aside here the differentiations between matri/patrilocal, uxori/virilocal, avunculocal, etc., less necessary for the argument presented here.

11 See the hypotheses related to Aberle's final chapter in the current version of the Ethnographic Atlas, the Human Relations Area Files: https://hraf.yale.edu/ehc/documents/282, with links to similar statements in the literature (last visited 10-5-2020).

largely in smaller-scale societies in a range moving from egalitarian tribes to small states. In 1969, shortly before matriliny would recede into the margins of the academic debate, Mary Douglas published a thought-provoking article about the 'doom' of matriliny in the modern world, integrating Aberle's hypotheses in a lucid overall assessment (Douglas, 1969, 121-135).

From the 1970s onwards, the study of kinship and the practice of cross-cultural comparison were increasingly regarded with suspicion, as the instruments of an imperial and colonial mindset, no longer *salonfähig* for modern anthropologists. David Schneider, one of the editors of the authoritative 1961-volume on matrilineal kinship, stated during a 1971 lecture:

> 'kinship', like totemism, the matrilineal complex and matriarchy, is a non-subject since it does not exist in any culture known to man [...] 'kinship' is an artifact of the anthropologists' analytic apparatus and has no concrete counterpart in the cultures of any of the societies we studied (Schneider, 1984: VII).

The verdict, shocking at first, set new standards, dovetailing with the priorities of the post-structuralist, post-modernist, and post-colonial revolutions. In 1997, considering research in the previous decades, an anthropologist pleading for renewed study of the theme could plausibly state, 'matriliny as a topic in anthropology is as dead as a dodo, one would think' (Peters, 1997: 125).

While matriliny thus long ranked low on the academic agenda, the general question of female status was seen as urgent: it generated numerous publications and gave rise to the new field of gender studies. Here, the old ghost of matriarchy unexpectedly returned in several clashing incarnations. In an important interdisciplinary 1974-volume considering the status of women, Joan Bamberger examined South American myths of origins that included an early phase of power in the hands of women. She concluded that these stories, invariably ending with a successful takeover by men, served only to demonstrate the ineptness of female power. Her chapter ended with a ringing statement: 'the myth of matriarchy is but the tool used to keep woman bound to her place. To free her, we need to destroy the myth' (Bamberger, 1974: 280).

In the same year of 1974, the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas published an influential book seeking to demonstrate the predominance of a 'great goddess' in Old Europe from the late stone age to *c.* 3000 BC (Gimbutas, 1974; Idem, 1981). Gimbutas noticed a 'a single line of development of a religious system from the Upper Palaeolithic through the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Copper Age, based on a matrifocal social organization' (Gimbutas, 1981: 4). The great goddess and matrifocality, Gimbutas argued, left traces in many places – including cases highlighted earlier by Bachofen and his colleagues (Gimbutas, 1999: 121-125).

Gimbutas's mixture of archaeological evidence, attractively presented in statuettes and drawings exuding the powers of fertility and procreation, and speculation about the socio-religious system behind these images, appealed to an

audience of 'spiritual feminists'.[12] They embraced 'mother earth' as a harmonious utopia of primordial female power, not so distant from Bachofen's *Tellus Mater*. This curious amalgamation of ideas appealing to Victorian patriarchs as well as to twentieth-century feminists triggered a series of critical responses. In several books and articles, Cynthia Eller restated Bamberger's argument and rightly pointed to the male Victorian genealogy of matriarchy. Eller's criticism, however, dealt with the anthropological or archaeological evidence only superficially. By using the term matriarchy in a way that stressed female power, moreover, she missed the opportunity to assess the far more plausible evidence relating to matriliny and matrifocality in past and present (Eller, 1995; Idem, 2000; Idem, 2011).[13]

Around the turn of the millennium the debate seemed to start all over again, now triggered by genetics and evolutionary biology, and focusing on 'female-biased kinship' rather than on the canard of gynecocracy. An old question resurfaced: paternity confidence. Nineteenth-century matriarchists had founded their argument on the uncertainty, or even ignorance, of paternity among roaming men, in stark contrast with the indisputable connection between the mother and her child. Matrifocal patterns of belonging, they surmised, were a consequence of promiscuity with its inevitable consequence: the uncertainty of paternity. Currently, the same question recurs in the framework of 'selfish genes': men will prefer their sisters' sons over their sex partners' offspring if paternity is highly uncertain. The genes they shared with their sisters were likely to prove a safer bet in circumstances of extreme paternity uncertainty. Thus, lateral inheritance and succession, from the mother's brother to the sister's son, a pattern frequently observed by anthropologists, suddenly acquired new urgency.[14] The question raised by Aberle, 'under what circumstances is matrilineal reckoning likely to arise, to survive, and to disappear?' has therefore recently been reassessed from several perspectives. Two of the recurring components will be discussed below.

12 See some examples with further details and literature at: https://www.hagia.de/en/home/; http://mmstudies.com/scholars/; https://www.goettner-abendroth.de; all visited 12 May 2020.

13 See Eller, 2000: 13 for the definition: 'any society in which women's power is equal or superior to men's and in which the culture centers around values and life events described as "feminine"'. The point about women in power had already been debunked by Tylor, Westermarck, Lippert, and others in the late nineteenth century, whereas the implications of matriliny, as discussed by Aberle and others, did give rise to relevant new questions.

14 See the literature review and hypothesis, and evidence in Holden – Sear – Mace, 2003; interestingly, the authors in their conclusion refer approvingly to Morgan, while underlining their view of patriliny and matriliny should be seen as 'flexible, adaptive responses to the environment, rather than as stages in cultural evolution' (p. 110).

Ploughs and cows

Bachofen concentrated on the mythical-religious role of women, and spent little time on economic pursuits, yet he did state unequivocally that gynecocracy was connected to:

> …der Periode des Ackerbaulebens, der geregelten Bodenkultur, nicht jener der natürlichen Erdzeugung, nicht dem Sumpfleben (Bachofen, 1897: 10, 118, 140, 209, and 258).

McLennan took the family and the capture of women as his starting point, and referred only in passing to agriculture. Morgan, however, explicitly related the centrality of women and female descent to forms of subsistence, and he replaced Bachofen's association between *Ackerbau* and gynecocracy with another linkage:

> After domestic animals began to be reared in flocks and herds, becoming thereby a source of subsistence as well as objects of individual property, and after tillage had led to the ownership of houses and lands in severalty, an antagonism would be certain to arise against the prevailing form of gentile inheritance, because it excluded the owner's children, whose paternity was becoming more assured, and gave his property to his gentile kindred. A contest for a new rule of inheritance, shared in by fathers and their children, would furnish a motive sufficiently powerful to effect the change (Morgan, 1877: 345).

'Common lands and joint tillage' went together with descent in the female line; herds, the individual allotment of lands, and private property would engender inheritance in the male line (Morgan, 1877: 349-350, 470). More than matriliny, patriliny allowed the transfer of property within a core group.

Some of Morgan's assertions have stood the test of time. Eduard Hahn's 1908 history of agriculture described matriarchy first and foremost as a phase in which women's labour in *Hackbau* predominated; he repeated and expanded Morgan's view that the introduction of animal husbandry and the plough (*Pflugbau*) changed the status of women (Hahn, 1908: 48-49, 61, 68-70). The view that descent through the female line would disappear after the introduction of plough agriculture and animal husbandry has been confirmed many times, with numerous authors citing the catchy statement coined by Aberle in 1961: 'the cow is the enemy of matriliny' (Aberle, 1961: 680).[15] This negative relationship can be phrased in more general terms: the intensification of agriculture, usually coupled with growing populations and the need of higher yields per area, changed the

15 'The cow is the enemy of matriliny, and the friend of patriliny'; note the earlier statement in Murdock, 1949: 206: 'The adoption of a pastoral economy has almost universally resulted in patrilocal residence. A similar effect tends to appear where men supplant women as tillers of the soil, often in consequence of harnessing their domestic animals to the plow'; see a recent corroboration: Holden – Mace, 2003.

location and nature of female labour and made patriliny more likely ('adaptive') than matriliny.[16] In a particularly careful reassessment of matriliny and horticulture in Africa, C. S. Lancaster noted:

> Matriliny fades with the establishment of plow agriculture as the principal adaptive stance, is strikingly infrequent where there is intensive wet rice cultivation, and begins to fade as cattle keeping is added to pure horticulture, disappearing entirely when full pastoralism becomes the adaptive stance. In other words, matriliny fades with situations regularly involving large-scale coordination of male labor and public works maintained by supracommunity organization, increased importance of divisible and productive property such as domesticated animals, equipment, and cash crops, and/or with male control of the major tools of production (Lancaster, 1976: 551).[17]

Lancaster, however, also pointed out that among horticultural peoples, patriliny still occurred more often than matriliny, and noted that combined forms of descent were even more common.

In addition to horticulture, fishing has been seen as conducive to the consolidation of matriliny. On the one hand, fishing, like horticulture, can offer an abundance of subsistence particularly to areas with a low population density; this fits the patterns outlined in Aberle and Douglas. On the other hand, fishing can lead to a protracted absence of males, another reason for the emergence of matricentric customs (Aberle, 1961: 703; BenYishay – Grosjean – Vecci, 2017). In no single form of subsistence, however, did matriliny predominate, and wherever it occurred it tended to recede with increasing population density and the intensification of production.

The impact of plough agriculture and the domestication of animals have been connected specifically to the changeover from matriliny to patriliny, but also in more general terms to women's declining status. The argument has been that plough agriculture ended the predominance of women typical for subsistence horticulture and concentrated their tasks in the vicinity of the house. This strengthened male dominance and tended to restrict women to the domestic sphere. These ideas, present in Morgan and more explicitly phrased in Hahn, were elaborated by Ester Boserup in 1970, and have since been restated and expanded by numerous other scholars. In a recent survey, the economists Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn have systematically combined data about the onset and spread of plough agriculture with current indicators of women's status. As a result, a world map with striking convergences and remarkably stubborn long-term

16 On the conditions of plough introduction see Pryor, 1985; its impact on women: Boserup, 1970; Whyte, 1978; Burton – White, 1984; most recently Alesina – Giuliano – Nunn, 2013 and Bonvillain, 2021; Surowiec – Snyder – Creanza, 2019: 1-12 confirm the relationship between the introduction of cattle and the plough and the disappearance of matriliny.

17 See also at 554: 'female-centered farming (simple horticulture) vanishes on a worldwide basis where the practice of plowing permanent fields takes root'.

regional continuities emerges, which captured the attention of the press (*The Guardian*, 2011).[18] This confirmation of an old idea with new methods necessarily downplays change over time and regional discrepancies. It confirms a generalized statement rather than a relationship equally valid for all times and places. Within 'plough lands' the status of women varied enormously.

The other correlation frequently mentioned, between pastoralism and patriliny, cannot be accepted as an iron law (Aberle, 1961: table 17-4); neither did pastoralism always negatively affect the status of women. Berber-speaking groups among the North African Tuareg combined pastoralism with mixed matrilineal as well as patrilineal patterns; Berber groups have been known for the relatively strong status of their women (Keenan, 1977a; Idem, 1977b: 242, 247).[19] Nomadic pastoralist groups conquering China left more leeway to women than was common in the Chinese agricultural tradition. There is no reason to question the general correlations established by statistical analysis of ethnographic data, but more specialized work will inevitably highlight diverging patterns. It shows that descent, inheritance, succession and residence did not necessarily adhere to either a matri- or a patricentric format. Matriliny could converge with patrilocal residence, and vice versa. Indeed, as an adaptive strategy matrilocality may often have preceded matrilineality. Moreover, it has been presented as more important for the position of women than the subsequent development of matrilineal descent.[20]

Nineteenth-century evolutionists initially failed to distinguish clearly descent in the female line from rule by women. A similar mistake can easily be made by conflating the share of women in subsistence with their overall status. Lancaster noted that, even where women predominated in the horticultural economy, men were likely to capture the 'prestige sphere' of status accumulated through trade or hunting as well as political leadership. Whenever status opportunities expanded, even in areas defined by female horticultural activity, men were likely to grab them; in the process, the forms of descent and residence could be impacted (Lancaster, 1979).[21] Discussing the emergence of patrilocality, bridewealth, and polygyny, Murdock cited cattle in addition to other forms of movable wealth such as slaves or valuables as important factors. Power, property, and prestige 'spell doom for the matrilocal principle'. Warfare engenders further inequality and heightens male prestige (Murdock, 1949: 206-207; Douglas, 1969: 121). Patriliny

18 See Robin McKie, 'The root of inequality? It's down to whether you ploughed or hoed', *The Guardian,* 30 July 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2011/jul/30/all, visited 3 June 2021.

19 In general, Keenan shows that the two forms were relevant for different groups and occasions.

20 Murdock, 1949: 201-203 postulated the priority of residential rules in 1949, pointing to Lowie's 1920 *Primitive Society,* and also suggested changes in the residence patterns more generally could be an adaptive response to changing situations; Gough, 1961: 551-553 likewise argued that matrilineal societies all at some point had evolved on the basis of matrilocal residence patterns; however, Surowiec – Snyder – Creanza, 2019: 7 question the hypothesis and suggest matrilineal descent could preceed matrilocal residence. Bonvillain, 2021: 129 suggests that matrilocality, more than matrilineal descent itself, determines the status of women. See below on warfare and matrilocality.

21 See critical comments by Poewe, 1979 followed by Lancaster's reply.

thus is linked to property, hierarchy, and exclusiveness; matriliny to labour, equality, and inclusiveness. Mary Douglas argued that the adaptive strength of matriliny lay in its openness and numerous cross-cutting relationships. Porous boundaries allowed easy entry into the group. This ability to recruit labour and include people was particularly useful in situations of plentiful subsistence, throughout history mostly for small horticultural or fishing populations, but, as Douglas argued, perhaps even in the present-day economy:

> Matriliny should be capable of flourishing in modern market economies wherever the demand for men is higher than the demand for things [...] On my view the enemy of matriliny is not the cow as such, not economic development as such, but economic restriction (Douglas, 1969: 131).

In conditions of 'steady economic growth', Douglas concluded, matriliny could still have a future in Africa (Douglas, 1969: 132-133).

Warfare: inward clashes versus outward expansion

These propensities can be related to another cliché attributed to matriarchy by Bachofen, internal peace:

> Abwesenheit innerer Zwietracht, Abneigung gegen Unfrieden wird gynaikokratischen Staaten besonders nachgerühmt (Bachofen, 1897: XI).

Bachofen's reference to the absence of internal discord in 'gynecocracies' fits a characteristic frequently attributed to matrilineal and matrilocal groups. Matricentric forms of descent and residence created numerous cross-cutting ties and prevented sharply delineated group boundaries. Brothers lived dispersed, in the villages of their spouses. Men, rather than women, changed places, moving between their descent groups and their wife's family. Yet nevertheless these roaming men, rather than the women who defined descent and location, held positions of leadership and prestige. Their offices and wealth would likely move to sisters' sons rather than to their biological sons, part of another family.

Patrilineal descent and patrilocal residence in principle created the same puzzle for women moving to the family of their spouse, but the break took shape here between the mother and her family of origin rather than between mother and child. Moreover, women were likely to have more limited access to property and office than men in matricentric settings. Descent through the male line and residence in the father's family, converging with the general male predominance in spheres of power and prestige, created a heightened potential for violence. Agnates living together were liable to engage in strife with similarly organized contiguous communities. If these groups practiced exogamy, finding their spouses outside of their own patriliny, raids might involve plunder as well as women-capturing. Women rarely acted as warriors here, but they were often

the target of male violence (Adams, 1983).[22] 'Fraternal interest groups' have consistently been understood as an explanation of recurring internecine violence. Conversely, the cross-cutting ties created by matrilocality could prevent this form of strife.

However, the same characteristics made matrilocality quite suitable as a basis for outward violence on a larger scale and at a greater distance. Cross-cutting ties helped to prevent internal conflict; open group boundaries made is easier to recruit allies. Douglas's remarks about the adaptive value of matriliny in situations of plenty and the need for labour also apply to phases of migration and expansion. Such moments, characterized by external rather than internal violence, have been put forward as explanations for the appearance of matrilocality by William Divale:

> When a primitive society (band or tribe) or a large portion of its members migrate or are driven into a new region which is already inhabited by other societies of similar complexity, matrilocal (uxorilocal) residence will develop (Divale, 1974: 79).

Not only did matrilocal residence help to reduce internal strife and recruit allies; it also, and perhaps primarily, can be seen as an adaptation to the protracted absence of males caused by long and distant wars (rather than by localized raids). The absence of men in warfare was facilitated by the pre-existing preponderance of women in horticultural labour, a condition commonly associated with matriliny. Divale's hypotheses, underpinned by his statistical examination of the ethnographic record, have been connected speculatively by Doug Jones to the two roughly contemporary (3000-500 BCE) migration waves of the Bantu and Austronesian language groups (Jones, 2011: 177-200).[23] Jones concludes that 'matricentric social organization is not a universal stage but—very often—a phase in a particular mode of expansion' (Jones, 2011: 196).[24]

This intriguing hypothesis cannot easily be substantiated; it raises questions about the predominance of patricentric social forms in the Indo-European language group, likewise characterized by waves of expansion (Fortunato – Jordan, 2010). Nevertheless, it has the advantage of suggesting a possible explanation for the gradual replacement of matriliny by patriliny: a temporary adaptive response, matrilocal residence and matriliny, would slowly cede to patricentric forms. Thus, the emergence and consolidation of matricentric forms during the Bantu and Austronesian migrations might help to explain the strong residual presence of matrilocality and matriliny in the regions involved. This, finally, brings to mind the

22 Stressing exogamy and patrilocality rather than any structural differences between man and woman.

23 See on global regions and descent Burton et al., 1996 and Fortunato – Jordan, 2010, showing a patricentric tendency in the Indo-European language family, and a matricentric tendency in the Austronesian language family. Additional discussion in Mattison, 2011 and Marck, 2008.

24 On Southern African patterns of descent, different conclusions are presented in Badenhorst, 2010, suggesting a pre-migration matricentric pattern.

frequency of women in positions of power in Africa and Austronesia, the initial motivation for my foray into this field.

Epilogue

While few scholars would defend the matriarchy-thesis in its nineteenth-century evolutionary format, there is ample reason for a reconsideration of 'matricentricity' or 'female-biased kinship' in world history. Several hypotheses, particularly those suggested by Morgan, have recurred in recent work based on wholly different methods. In a recent article Jordan and Fortunato state this explicitly:

> Morgan's model of cultural evolution in progressive stages was quite different to a neo-Darwinian evolutionary approach. In the behavioural ecological approach used here, matriliny and patriliny are viewed as flexible, adaptive responses to the environment, rather than as stages in cultural evolution. Nonetheless, the two factors Morgan identified, heritable wealth and paternity uncertainty, remain central to our understanding of variation in matriliny and patriliny in human social organisation (Holden – Sear – Mace, 2003: 110).

Interestingly, even the idea that early kinship necessarily was matrilineal has been claimed by several authors contributing to a 2008 volume on *Early Human Kinship* (Allen – Callan – Dunbar, 2008). The title of Chris Knight's muscular Marxist vindication of Bachofen's legacy is unequivocal: 'Early Kinship was matrilineal'. Knight critically reviews the early twentieth-century attack on the matriarchist consensus and pointedly concludes:

> Let's take simplicity as our starting point. For a woman, her kin come first. Once a brother, always a brother – unlike sexual partners, who may come and go (Knight, 2008: 79).

In the introduction to the same volume Wendy James states in a similar vein but more carefully:

> The core community of a home base would, moreover, be likely to consist of females, and a more transitory population of males, whether mates or offspring (James, 2008: 12-13; Opie – Power, 2008).

We should remind ourselves that the predominance of either matricentric or patricentric forms of social organization, at the core of the discussions reflected in this paper, was an exception. Components such as descent, residence, succession, inheritance did not necessarily all converge in one of these directions. In addition, they could differ for various groups coexisting in one society. Mixed forms, subject to frequent adaptations, were more common than the fully consistent examples of the extremes. There is no reason, moreover, to replicate the essentializing overstatements that characterized the subsequent phases of scholarship on human social evolution, zooming in on 'Man the Hunter' before discovering

'Woman the Gatherer', and only finally appreciating the more mixed patterns of both sexes (James, 2008; Fedigan, 1986).

Will it ever be possible to come to definitive conclusions? In 1976 Lancaster concluded his article laconically: 'Whether horticulture commonly went with matriliny and matriarchy in the earliest Neolithic times is, of course, possible but unknowable' (Lancaster, 1976: 559).

Recent assessments are more positive, listing the floor size of household dwellings among the reliable indicators of matrilocality (Souvatzi, 2017; Ensor, 2017; Hrnčíř et al., 2020). At this point there is no conclusive evidence for the overall predominance of matricentric forms in early human kinship. However, many undisputed findings point to their strong presence in early human history as well as to their gradual decline over time. The nineteenth-century idea of matricentricity in early history, shorn of its overstatements and phantasies, deserves another round of testing.

This closer look at the debate about female-biased kinship in history tells us little about female leadership. Nor does it suggest that female leadership might herald a hard-working, egalitarian, and inclusive society, whereas male leaders simply pursue prestige, property, and heroism. Such conclusions fail to discriminate between ecology, adaptive social responses, cultural traditions of gendered behaviour, political contingency, and the actual deeds of men and women. The collective biography of male and female dynastic leaders suggests that gendered cultural expectations have been a predominant influence, at times beneficial, far more often burdensome and restrictive, and sometimes disastrous (see discussion and bibliography in Duindam, 2016). A better understanding of this legacy might clear the way for more sensible leadership in the hands of women as well as men.

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