

A Transdisciplinary Perspective of Reaffirming Matristic Societies

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Abstract

In this article, I pull from historical discussions of matristic societies, Marxist feminist discussions of the matriarchy, the work of Marija Gimbutas, and the work of Göettner-Abendroth and Modern Matriarchal Studies to form connections to transnational and decolonial feminism. For the most part, matristic societies function outside of patriarchy and capitalism. Although the social structure and power women attain varies within each society, it would be unfair to label all matristic societies as patriarchal ones with lineage running through the female line. Individuals have more freedom of choice than in many patriarchal societies.

Keywords: Matristic, Gimbutas, Engels, Göettner-Abendroth, Modern Matriarchal Studies

Introduction

The colonial-capitalist-patriarchy mutually reinforces the dialectical relationship between colonialism, capitalist class structure, and hierarchical sexual structuring (Eisenstein, 1979). Because we cannot distinguish which “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1974) stem from colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchy, we must attack the systems in unison. The global economy is controlled by the colonial-capitalist-patriarchy, so we must take note of societies that function in opposition to or outside of it. There are few scholars who study socio-economic systems that have functioned and continue to function outside of colonial-capitalist-patriarchy and there is much to be learned from that line of questioning, utilizing transdisciplinarity. Engels, Gimbutas, and the modern matriarchal studies of Göettner-Abendroth discussed matristic societies in differing time periods but they came to similar conclusions.

There are connections between these scholars mentioned above, that strengthen the argument that matristic societies were the norm in pre-capitalist society. The analysis produced explores how matristic societies are more gender-balanced, egalitarian, and equitable. This idea has been consistently discredited by archaeologists and anthropologists partly due to underlying sexism in the academy (Göettner-Abendroth, 2017; Hutton, 1997; Marler, 2006; Meskell, 1995; Shelach, 2004; Spretnak, 2011; Uberoi, 1995). This work uses a transdisciplinary lens to reaffirm the notion that matristic societies are historically and currently in existence.

Definition of Key Terms

I provide definitions of a few key terms that complement the positionality and scope of this research. A society is *patriarchal* when men control private property and the ability to generate an economic surplus, and where women are the property of, or controlled by the father and husband (Ferguson, Hennessy, & Nagel, 2016). Patriarchy has also been defined by Marler (2006), “as the social arrangement in which men possess structural power by monopolizing high-status positions in important social, economic, legal, and religious institutions” (p. 1). Patriarchy typically promotes warfare, which further intensifies male dominance on every level of society (Christ, 1997).

Matrilineal describes kinship, lineage, or inheritance based on the mother or female line (Behar et al., 2008; Kennett et al., 2017). A *matriarchy* is not a social structure in which women benefit at the expense of men (Göettner-Abendroth, 2012). Rather, matriarchal cultures are characterised by shared leadership between men and women that results in political harmony, social balance, and emotional well-being (Göettner-Abendroth, 2012).

Gimbutas (1992) called the Neolithic cultures of Southeast Europe, and the Bronze Age societies that replaced them, “matristic, not matriarchal, because matriarchal always arouses ideas of dominance and is compared with the patriarchy. But it was a balanced society, it was not that women were really so powerful that they usurped everything that was masculine” (p. 237). According to Marler’s research, Gimbutas meant *matristic* to combine matrilineal, matrifocal, matricentric, and egalitarian, in the sense that the sexes were balanced and complementary (Marler, 2006, p. 72). This investigation will employ the term *matristic* when the research does not specifically state a society is matrilineal or matriarchal.

Historical Background of Matristic Societies

It is thought that matristic societies originated in Asia and Africa and spread through waterways as agricultural societies (Behar et al., 2008; Kennett et al., 2017; E. Reed, 1975). Some Western scholars believe these matristic societies were in existence in the Paleolithic Age, ranging from 2.6 million years ago to 10,000 BCE (Behar et al., 2008; Kennett et al., 2017; E. Reed, 1975). Other Western researchers (Fluehr-Lobban, 1979, 1987; Renfrew, 1990) believe that male

dominance always existed or that patriarchal structures resulted from internal evolution from primitive social systems, which some scholars have demonstrated is inaccurate (Marler, 2006). The abundance of matrilineal societies was diminished during the Iron Age (600 BCE to 1000 CE), when personal property was on the rise and patriarchal tribes took over (Christ, 1997). Gimbutas' (1991) Kurgan theory states the progressive intrusion of nomadic pastoralists from north of the Black Sea disrupted the mature, matrilineal, horticultural societies of southeast Europe (Marler, 2006). According to Christ (1997):

Women probably were the inventors of agriculture. Because women were the primary food gatherers and food preparers in Paleolithic societies, they are most likely ones to have noticed the relation between dropped seeds and the green plants that come up. Because women had responsibility for the care of human babies, they may also have been the ones to feed and care for the abandoned young of wild animals and thus the first to domesticate animals. (p. 53)

A recent study that supports the role of women in early agriculture, from researchers at the University of Cambridge, compares the bone strength in prehistoric women to those of living women. There is some data from living men, but there was no collected data on the bone structure of modern women to provide a comparative data set. This is important because men and women do not build bone in the same way in response to repeated physical strain and stress (Macintosh, Pinhasi, & Stock, 2017, p. 3). When researchers look at living people and athletes, and their level of activity is known, they can link characteristics in their bones to those activities. The researchers compared the bones of prehistoric women to those of women who were on the Cambridge University rowing team because they wanted athletes from a sport that targeted the arm muscles and was very repetitive. After the comparison, it was discovered that these Bronze Age (3000 BCE to 600 BCE) women had arms that were 9% to 13% stronger than those of female rowers and 30% stronger than non-athletes of any gender (Macintosh, Pinhasi, & Stock, 2017, p. 7). They believe processing grain and farming by hand is what caused this impressive muscle mass (Macintosh, Pinhasi, & Stock, 2017, p. 7). There would not have been plows yet, and these Bronze Age women would have had limited tools to help alleviate the intensity of work.

Engels and Marxist Feminism

Engels (1884/2010) discussed the family and the rise of private property that led to the diminishing rights of women during the industrial revolution in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. His work is the foundation of Marxist Feminism while Marxism progressed from the various works of Karl Marx. Beginning with Engels's statement that two kinds of production are necessary to sustain life, the production of material goods, and the production of human beings themselves, these two labours were held as a natural division between the sexes because women are the only ones capable of bearing and nursing children and, therefore, of fulfilling one aspect of human-reproduction (Green, 1986, p. 211).

Although Engels discussed anthropology and economics, he and Gimbutas had very similar ideas about the social structure in pre-capitalist society. They both believed matrilineal societies were the norm and approached discussion on matrilineal societies in interdisciplinary ways. According to Engels's (1884/2010) analysis of women's situation in the history of different economic modes of production, women are originally equal to, if not more powerful than, men in communal forms of production with matrilineal family organizations (Ferguson, Hennessy, & Nagel, 2016).

Engels pointed out that the nuclear family was a historical phenomenon.

The nuclear family structure was created when the forces of production were developing, around the beginning of the Iron Age. The nuclear family structure will eventually disappear, together with other institutions such as marriage and the state, when the force of production is finally developed (Shih, 2009, p. 8). Women lose power when private property comes into existence as a mode of production. Men's control of private property, and the ability thereby to generate a surplus, changes the family form to a patriarchal one where women, and often enslaved people, become the property of the father and husband (Shih, 2009).

The anthropologist Fluehr-Lobban (1979) did not address the matrilineal societies that continue to exist despite the rise of patriarchy and stated that the resurgence of the study of matriarchies was "an idealist thought" (p. 341). She also assumed humans are static in their behavior and that spiritual practices do not have an impact on social order. Marxism, as a philosophy of human nature, stresses the centrality of work in the creation of human nature itself and human self-understanding. Both the changing historical relations between human work and nature, and the relations of humans to each other in the production and distribution of goods to meet material

needs, construct human nature differently in different historical periods. Nomadic humans are different than agrarian or industrial humans (Ferguson, Hennessy, & Nagel, 2016).

Fluehr-Lobban (1979, 1987) disagrees with one of the fundamentals of Marxism, that matriarchies did not exist and were not the norm in pre-capitalist society. The positionality of her beliefs is not coming from a transdisciplinary or feminist perspective. Recently, there has been DNA evidence that Gimbutas' suppositions about the societies she termed Old Europe are correct (Christ, 2017).

According to Christ (2017), "in a lecture titled 'Marija Rediviva: DNA and Indo-European Origins,' renowned archaeologist Lord Colin Renfrew . . . who had been one of Gimbutas's most vociferous antagonists and a powerful gate-keeper, concluded...: 'Marija [Gimbutas]'s Kurgan hypothesis has been magnificently vindicated'" (p. 1). With this new information, and from the perspective of decolonial and transnational feminism, there is room to re-examine Fluehr-Lobban's work on Marxism and the matriarchy using a Marxist feminist framework.

Scholarship of Gimbutas

The work of Gimbutas is important to this conversation because she excavated and wrote about matrilineal societies. She chose not to use the term *matriarchal* because there were negative associations projecting it as a mirror opposite of patriarchy, and therefore inherently non-egalitarian and hierarchical, so she created the term matrilineal. Gimbutas (1989, 1991, 1992, 2001) described the collective identity of Indo-European cultures in the Neolithic (10,200 BCE to 4500 BCE) to Chalcolithic (4500 BCE to 3000 BCE, also known as the Copper Age) periods and named them "Old Europe." The area Old Europe occupied extends from the Aegean and Adriatic seas, including the islands, as far north as Czechoslovakia, southern Poland, and western Ukraine (Gimbutas, 1992, p. 17).

Between *c.* 7000 BCE and *c.* 3500 BCE, the inhabitants of this region developed a much more complex social organization than their western and northern neighbors involving craft specialization and the creation of religious and governmental institutions. The societies in Old Europe independently discovered utilizing copper and gold for ornaments and tools; appear to have created a rudimentary form of written language; and developed arts, technology, and social relationships (Gimbutas, 1992, p. 17). These societies showed no evidence of organized warfare, and left behind thousands of artifacts, such as a rich legacy of painting, pottery, sculptures, and

figurines all connected to goddesses and gods, who were at the center of a rich religious life (Reed & Starhawk, 2016).

Gimbutas traced a lineage of sacred Earth symbols going back to the earliest human art to the Old Stone Age (3.5 million years ago to 10,200 BCE), with their vibrant images of animals and female forms. Gimbutas found, restored, described, and photographed tens of thousands of relics from Old Europe over her lifetime of work. She was able to conclude that these societies were matrilineal in nature and were able to prosper, far longer than the warring patriarchal tribes that followed, due to their cooperative and Earth-based religious and spiritual practices.

Reeves Sanday's (1998) research on the Minangkabau people of West Sumatra suggests an ethnographic parallel with Gimbutas' description of Old European societies in which the mother and child bond is sacred, and customs associated with matrilineal descent reside at the foundation of collective identity (Marler, 2006). Women nurture and uphold the ancient traditions centered around life cycle ceremonies which brings members of different clans together through which all members of the society are integrated (Marler, 2006).

Göttner-Abendroth and Modern Matriarchal Studies

Göttner-Abendroth continued the line of research that Gimbutas started, bringing an anthropological perspective as she engaged in field work of current matrilineal societies rather than historical ones. Because of the definitions spelled out earlier in this literature review, most scholars, specifically those in anthropology, do not use the term matriarchy to describe a female centered society. However, there are two notable researchers, Reeves Sanday (1998, 2002) and Göttner-Abendroth (1987, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2017, 2018), who are reclaiming the term in a way that honors how some of these societies define themselves. In matriarchal societies, the mother is the central figure, nurturing is a primary value, and the Earth is seen as sacred (Göttner-Abendroth, 2012, p. xix).

According to Göttner-Abendroth (2012),

the matriarchy paradigm . . . goes beyond all the various western feminisms that tend to remain captive to the European/western way of thinking. It is not confined to the situation of women, and does not foster an essentialist antagonism between women-in-general and men-in-general. (p. xix)

Such ahistorical generalizations are counterproductive because they overlook the broad diversity of societies and historical contexts in which gender questions are rooted (Göttner-Abendroth, 2012, p. xix).

Anti-globalization and anti-capitalism are central components of this decentering, decolonizing project (Ransom, 2018, p. 19). In the interest of this article, the critical paradigm is important because Göttner-Abendroth advanced the study of these societies for decades. She has also done so in a way that employs the tenets of transnational feminism that centers the epistemic validity of women's knowledge and experience in multiple non-Western contexts and as represented by them, instead of being subject to the projections of sexist Western notions.

Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe by Göttner-Abendroth (2012) is one of the most comprehensive texts that addresses the socio-economic foundations of matrilineal societies. This book presents the results of Göttner-Abendroth's pioneering research in the field of modern matriarchal studies, based on a new definition of matriarchy as true gender-egalitarian societies. This new perspective on matriarchal societies is developed step by step from the analysis of indigenous cultures in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

In the first chapter, Göttner-Abendroth (2012) provides a critical history of perspectives on matriarchy, which includes those who pioneered the field, a Marxist discussion, the anthropological-ethnological branch, the prehistory branch, the religious studies branch, the study of oral traditions branch, the archeological branch, and feminist and indigenous perspectives. Referring to the field of modern matriarchal studies, Göttner-Abendroth (2012) states, "this is not just another socio-cultural science, but a new, distinct field that transgresses existing disciplinary boundaries" (p. xvii). Although this article compares matriarchal societies to patriarchal ones and groups matriarchal societies together, matriarchal societies tend to vary widely in how they function surrounded by patriarchal norms.

Goettner-Abenroth (2009) has some fascinating ideas on why we need to take note of the way matriarchies function:

Economically, we have arrived at a position where it is no longer possible to further increase the amount of large scale industrial growth . . . without running the risk of totally annihilating the biosphere of the earth. A way out of this—one that has been discussed by others—is subsistence economy, based on local and regional units. These economies work frugally and self-sufficiently, and the resulting quality of life is more important to them than producing a great quantity of goods. . . . Women are the mainstays of these

economic structures and the societies that are based on them....This regionalization, in which women guide the economy, is a matriarchal principle. (p. 2)

Although Göettner-Abendroth has produced significant research and helped to create the field of modern matriarchal studies, there is a lack of economic analysis from economists.

Conclusion

When Gimbutas began to focus her work on matristic societies, there was backlash rooted in sexism. Although Gimbutas was an archeologist, her research had far-reaching impacts that crossed into other disciplines. Anthropologists did not want to acknowledge that women, historically, had more power than they currently do in a global patriarchal structure. Engels (1884/2010) was one of the first Western scholars in the modern era to assert this idea. Although the recent work by Göettner-Abendroth has less theory and assumption than Gimbutas and, certainly, Engels, both scholars explicate very valid points that were overlooked.

This work is an act of resistance against patriarchy and capitalism because our overarching socio-economic system is collapsing. We need to find an alternative system that has engrained respect for women, children, and the earth. Although matristic societies are not utopias, they are better than what we have now. In Western economic thought, there are no economic models that do not assume patriarchy, and there is little economic research on matristic societies in general. There is an abundance of information on historical and current matristic societies, but my research has uncovered no in-depth economic analysis that has been conducted by someone with a foundation in economics. I have discovered much opportunity for exploration of matristic societies and analysis through decolonial, transnational, and Marxist feminist lenses.

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