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Matriarchal Society: Definition and Theory

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Developing a new social science

After I had completed my Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Munich on the subject of the „Logic of Interpretation“, I taught philosophy and theory of science there from 1973-1983. Then I left university system, because I had found a much more important and socially relevant task. Ever since 1976, I had been doing pioneer work, along with my female colleagues, in founding Women`s Studies in West Germany, and in this context I presented an outline of my „theory of matriarchal societies“ for the first time. I had started to develop this theory as a young student of 25 years, using all the libraries of the different disciplines for my interdisciplinary research and traveling widely to visit many archaeological sites. These were my unofficial studies, in addition to the official ones in Analytical Philosophy, Theory of Science, and Formal Logic. It was in 1976 that I first presented it in public, and in 1980 my first book in this field was published (See: *The Goddess and her Heros*, in German 1980 / in English 1995). From 1983 on, I devoted myself completely to this task, one that was not acknowledged by any university in Germany. But another audience was very interested: my book marked the beginning of the discussion about women-centered societies and matriarchy in the New Feminist Movement in West Germany.

I was well aware that this discussion had a long tradition in German-speaking Europe (Switzerland, Austria, Germany), going back as far as the famous work of J.J. Bachofen: *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, which came out in 1861. For more than a century, the discussion on „mother right“ and „matriarchy“ continued: this subject now was used and abused by all the intellectual schools of thought, and all political parties, each with their distinctly different point of view. What worried me most about this reception of Bachofen`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 unclear definitions and excessive emotionality already occurs in Bachofen`s work itself.

Bachofen`s work is in the field of history of cultures, and it represents a perfect parallel to the work of H. L. Morgan (in the field of anthropology/ethnology), who did research in the matriarchal society of the Iroquois of his time (1851 and 1871/77). But the works of these scholars have been evaluated very differently: the differences cast light on just how political the subject of „matriarchy“ is in the midst of our patriarchal society. Scholars of the humanities and social sciences, who should be extremely interested in Bachofen`s findings, ignored or ridiculed the majority of them. Morgan was praised and called „the father of ethnology“, because he founded the new science of anthropology/ethnology; meanwhile Bachofen, who also founded a new science: the „science of non-patriarchal societies“, or „matriarchy-logy“, was not honoured in the same way. The reason is simple: if his work had been taken seriously, it would have caused the beginning of the breakdown of patriarchal ideology and world view. It marks

the beginning of the development of a new paradigm of human history. That is why it is too dangerous to be acknowledged adequately!

After these insights, I decided – building on the foundation of my philosophical tools – to give the matriarchal studies, i.e., the research into all forms of non-patriarchal societies in both past and present, a modern scientific foundation. I value this field of research as too important to be neglected in this respect; furthermore I am involved as a researcher myself. “To give it a modern scientific foundation” means to formulate a definition, that integrates its vast material, and to develop a supporting theoretical framework. In the light of a theoretical framework, the many excellent special studies, that have already been done in this field, would more clearly exhibit their mutual interconnections, and future research could be inspired and guided by it. Developing such a universal theory does not at all mean to lock it into a closed system (a traditional philosophical attitude that has become obsolete), but rather it means to give it an open structure that is clarifying and helpful for each specific piece of research, including my own.

When I started to work on this task, I first spent ten years developing a research methodology for matriarchy, one that is basically interdisciplinary and relies on criticism of ideology. One part of the task was to relate the different disciplines used in this research to each other, and to do this systematically (and not only arbitrarily, as is often done). Another part was to develop a special method of ideological criticism to investigate all the different aspects of patriarchal ideology, and not just reproduce them unconsciously anew. Step by step, I developed the framework of a “theory of matriarchy”; I would like to present it now in a short outline. Then I want to give a sketch of the structural definition of “matriarchal society”, which is the core of the “theory of matriarchy”. Both sketches are the *result* of 30 years of research in the field of matriarchal societies, developed through a long process of trial and error. They are in no way presupposed deductive axioms, although I am presenting them here in a concentrated, abstract way.

Part 1

I want to begin with some notes concerning my use of the term „matriarchy“. In spite of the difficult connotations of this word, I call all non-patriarchal societies „matriarchal“ for several reasons:

1. The term „matriarchy“ is well known from the discussion that has gone on since 1861 (Bachofen), and it is by now a popular term.
2. Philosophical and scientific re-definitions mostly refer to well-known words and redefine them. After that, scholars can work with them, but they do not lose contact with the language of the people. In this process, the word often takes on a new, clearer and broader meaning even in the popular language; this is also influenced by the re-defining activities of scholars. In the case of the term „matriarchy“, this redefinition would be a great advantage, especially for women: *reclaiming* this term means to reclaim the knowledge about cultures that have been created by women.
3. It is my opinion that it may not always be helpful to create new scientific terms like „matrifocal“, „matricentric“, „matristic“, „gylanic“, etc. 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 – by the researchers as well as the critics – a view that neglects the intricate network of relationships and the complex social networks that characterize these cultures.

4. We are not obliged to follow the current, male biased notion of the term „matriarchy“ as meaning „domination by the mothers“. The only reason to understand it in this way is that it sounds parallel to „patriarchy“. The Greek word “arché” has a double meaning. It means “beginning” as well as “domination”. Therefore, we can translate “matriarchy” accurately as “the mothers from the beginning”. “Patriarchy”, on the other hand, translates correctly as “domination of the fathers”.

5. To use the term “matriarchy” in its re-defined, clarified meaning is also of political relevance. It doesn’t avoid the discussion with professional colleagues and the interested audience, which is urgently necessary. This might easily happen with the other terms, which have the tendency to conceal and to belittle. Researchers should not shy away from the provocative connotation of the term “matriarchy”, both because research in this field is so important and because only continued political provocation will bring about a change of mind.

The Scope of Modern Research in Matriarchy

Following the argumentation of my main work “The Matriarchy”, which is in the process of being published in several consecutive volumes, I briefly want to present my **theory of matriarchal society**. It shows the scope of modern research in matriarchy. Important research, which already exists about the topic, has been, and will continue to be, included in this framework.

In the first step of developing this theory I give an overview of the previous research in matriarchy. Therein I follow the course the research has taken, using examples of the scientific as well as of the political discussion. What becomes obvious is the lack of a clear and complete definition of “matriarchy”. Furthermore, in this book I put the method of ideological criticism in correct terms. This method is necessary in this area of study, because most of the early and contemporary writings about the topic contain a massive amount of patriarchal ideology. (See: *Das Matriarchat I. Geschichte seiner Erforschung*, Kohlhammer 1988-1995)

In the second step of the development of this theory I therefore formulate the complete structural definition of “matriarchy”, a definition we urgently need. It specifies the necessary and adequate characteristics of this form of society. It is not formulated abstractly, but arrived at by investigating the immense amount of ethnological material.

The systematic step of my ethnological research becomes visible now. I have dedicated the past ten years to this research, because we cannot get a complete definition of “matriarchy” from cultural history alone. There we are only dealing with the remains and fragments of former societies. That is not sufficient for an overall picture.

It remains undisputed that these may well be very numerous fragments, and that they may well be extremely important; still they can give us only scattered information. Through historical research alone we cannot know how matriarchal people thought or felt, how they organized their social patterns or political events, that is: how their society was structured as a whole. In order to gain this knowledge and – as a consequence thereof – to achieve a complete

definition of “matriarchy”, we have to examine the still living examples of this form of society. Fortunately, they still exist on all continents except Europe.

I have considered these cultures in the second step of my theory, in which I present all of the world’s extant matriarchal societies.

(See: *Das Matriarchat II,1. Stammesgesellschaften in Ostasien, Indonesien, Ozeanien*, Kohlhammer 1991/1999, and see: *Das Matriarchat II,2. Stammesgesellschaften in Amerika, Indien, Afrika*, Kohlhammer 2000).

In the third step of the development of my theory I use the complete definition of “matriarchy”, which I have now extracted, as a scientific tool for a revision of the cultural history of humankind. This history is much longer than the four to five thousand years of patriarchal history. In its longest periods, non-patriarchal societies were developed, in which women created culture and embodied the integral center of society. Extant matriarchal societies are the last examples.

Fortunately, in this field some excellent research is already available. It has been developed recently. What is still lacking, however, is the systematic framework of connection, that is, the overall picture of the long history of matriarchy. (Project: *Das Matriarchat III. Historische Stadtkulturen*, in the process of development)

It is obvious that such an immense task is impossible without a complete definition of “matriarchy”. After it has been formulated in the ethnological part of my theory, we now have, for the very first time, the chance to adequately write the complete history of humankind, and to do so without the distortions of patriarchal prejudices. This new interpretation of history is urgently necessary today, because the patriarchal interpretation of history more and more turns out to be wrong and out-dated.

In the fourth step of the development of this theory I write about the problem of the rise of patriarchy. Two important questions have to be answered: 1. How could patriarchal patterns develop in the first place? 2. How could they spread all over the world? The latter is by no means obvious.

In my opinion neither question has been sufficiently answered yet. Instead, a lot of pseudo-explanations have been offered. If we want to explain the development of patriarchy we first of all need clear knowledge about the form of society which existed previously – and that was matriarchy. At present, this knowledge is in the process of being developed. It is the absolute precondition for explaining the development of patriarchy. Otherwise, we begin with false assumptions.

Secondly, a theory about the development of patriarchy has to explain why patriarchal patterns emerged in different places, on different continents, at different times and under different conditions. The answers will be very different for the different regions of the world. This task has not yet been done at all. (Project: *Das Matriarchat IV. Entstehung des Patriarchats*, in the process of development).

In the fifth step of the development of this theory, I write about the analysis and history of patriarchy. Until now, the history of patriarchy has been written down as a history of domination, as a history “from the top”. But there also exists the perspective of the history “at the bottom” which shows a completely different picture. It is the history of women, of the lower classes, of the marginalized and the sub-cultures. It shows that patriarchy did not succeed in destroying the ancient and long matriarchal traditions on all continents. In the end, it parasitically lives on these traditions.

The task is to show that these traditions (oral traditions, customs, myths, rites folklore, etc.) have their roots in the preceding traditions, matriarchy. But we can recognize this only with the

help of the complete definition of matriarchy. If we can manage to follow the traces backwards through the history of patriarchy and to connect them, this means nothing less than **regaining our heritage**. (Project: *Das Matriarchat V. Matriarchale Traditionen in patriarchalen Gesellschaften*, in the process of development).

Part 2

Definition of the Matriarchal Society

Now I shall give the structural definition of „matriarchy“, which means, that not one criterion can be left out, if the definition is to be valid. I will present the criteria of matriarchal society on three levels: on the economic level, on the level of social patterns, and on the cultural level.

On the economic level, matriarchies are most often agricultural societies. The technologies of agriculture they developed reach from simple gardening to full agriculture with plowing (at the beginning of the Neolithic Age, about 10.000 before our time), and, finally, to the large irrigation systems of the earliest urban cultures. Simultaneously, the social forms of matriarchy continued to become more differentiated in the course of the millennia.. The rise of matriarchy is directly connected with the development of these new technologies.

Goods are distributed according to a system, that is identical with the lines of kinship and the patterns of marriage. This system prevents goods from being accumulated by one special person or one special group. Thus, the principles of equality are consciously kept up, and the society is egalitarian and non-accumulating. From a political point of view, matriarchies are societies with perfect mutuality. Every advantage or disadvantage concerning the acquisition of goods is mediated by social rules. For example, at the village festivals, wealthy clans are obliged to invite all inhabitants. They organize the banquet, at which they distribute their wealth to gain honor. Therefore, on the economic level I call matriarchies **–societies of reciprocity**.

On the social level, matriarchies are based on a union of extended clan. The people live together in big clans, which are formed according to the principle of *matrilinearity*, i.e. the kinship is exclusively acknowledged in the female line. The clan's name, and all social positions and political titles are passed on through the mother's line. Such a matri-clan consists at least of three generations of women: the clan-mother, her daughters, her granddaughters, and the directly related men: the brothers of the mother, her sons and grandsons. Generally, the matri-clan lives in one big clan-house, which holds from 10 to more than 100 persons, depending on size and architectural style. The women live permanently there, because daughters and granddaughters never leave the clan-house of their mother, when they marry. This is called *matrilocality*.

What is most important is the fact, that women have the power of disposition over the goods of the clan, especially the power to control the sources of nourishment: fields and food. This characteristic feature, besides matrilinearity and matrilocality, grants women such a strong position that these societies are „matriarchal“.

(Anthropologists do not make a distinction between merely matrilineal, and clearly matriarchal societies. This continues to produce great confusion.)

These matri-clans in their clan-house on their clan-land are self-supporting groups. How are the people in such self-supporting groups connected to the other clans of the village? This is effected by the patterns of marriage, especially the system of mutual marriage between

two clans. Mutual marriage between two clans is no individual marriage, but a communal marriage leading to communal matrimony. For example, the young men from clan-house A are married to the young women clan-house B, and the young men from clan-house B are married to the young women in clan-house A. This is called *mutual marriage between two clans* in a matriarchal village. The same takes place between fixed pairs of other clan-houses, for example the houses C and D, E and F. Due to additional patterns of marriage between all clans, finally everyone in a matriarchal village or a matriarchal town is related to everyone else by birth or by marriage. Therefore, I call matriarchies *societies of kinship*.

The young men, who have left the house of their mother after their marriage, do not have to go very far. Actually, in the evening they just go to the neighboring house, where their wives live, and they come back very early – at dawn. This form of marriage is called *visiting marriage*, and it is restricted to the night. It means, that matriarchal men have no right to live in the house of their wives. The home of matriarchal men is the clan-house of their mothers. There, they take part in the work in the fields and gardens, they take part in the decisions of the clan. There, they have rights and duties.

In this system of clans a matriarchal man never regards the children of his wife as his children, because they do not share his clan-name. They are only related to the woman whose clan-name they have. A matriarchal man, however, is closely related to the children of his sister: his nieces and nephews. They have the same clan-name as he. His attention, his care for their upbringing, the personal goods he passes on: all this is for the nieces and nephews. Biological fatherhood is not known, or is paid no attention. It is no social factor. Matriarchal men care for their nieces and nephews in a kind of *social fatherhood*.

Even the process of *taking a political decision* is organized along the lines of matriarchal kinship. In the clan-house, women and men meet in a council where domestic matters are discussed. No member of the household is excluded. After thorough discussion, each decision is taken by consensus. The same is true for the entire village: delegates from every clan-house meet in the village council, if matters concerning the whole village have to be discussed. These delegates can be the oldest women of the clans (the matriarchs), or the brothers and sons they have chosen to represent the clan. No decision concerning the whole village may be taken without the consensus of all clan-houses. This means, the delegates, who are discussing the matter, are not the ones who take the decision. It is not in this council that the policy of the village is made, because the delegates function only as bearers of communication. If the council notices that the clan-houses do not yet agree, the delegates return to the clan-houses to discuss matters further. In this way, consensus is reached in the whole village step by step.

A people living in a certain region takes decisions in the same way: delegates from all villages meet to exchange the decisions of their communities. Again, the delegates function only as bearers of communication. In such cases, it is usually men who are elected by their villages, since the clan-mothers do not leave their clan's houses and land. In contrast to the frequent ethnological mistakes made about these men, they are not the "chiefs" and do not, in fact, decide. Every village, and in every village every clan-house, is involved in the process of taking a decision, until consensus is reached on the regional level. Therefore, from the political point of view, I call matriarchies *egalitarian societies* or *societies of consensus*. These political patterns do not allow the accumulation of political power. In *exactly* this sense, they are free of domination: They have no class of rulers and no class of suppressed people, i.e., they do not know *enforcement bodies*, which are necessary to establish domination.

On the cultural level, these societies are not characterized by „fertility cults“ – such a simplifying view distorts the fact that these cultures have a complex religious system. The

fundamental concept matriarchal people have of the cosmos and their life, the belief they express in many rites, myths and spiritual customs, is the belief in rebirth. It is not the abstract idea of the transmigration of souls, as it later appears in Hinduism and Buddhism, but the concept of rebirth in a very concrete sense: all members of a clan know that after death they will be re-born – by one of the women of their own clan, in their own clan-house, in their home village. Every dead person returns directly as a small child to the same clan. Women in matriarchal societies are greatly respected, because they are granting rebirth. They are renewing and prolonging the life of the clan. This concept is the basis of the matriarchal view of life. Matriarchal people have adopted it from the natural world they live in: in nature, the growing, flourishing, withering, and the returning of the vegetation takes place every year. Matriarchal people are convinced that every plant, that withers in fall, is reborn next spring. Therefore, the Earth is the Great Mother granting rebirth and nurturing all beings.

In the sky, they observe the same cycle of coming and going: all celestial bodies rise, set and return every day and every night. They perceive the cosmos as the Great Goddess of Heaven and Creation. She is constantly creating everything, it is she who grants the ordering of time. She gives birth to all stars in the east, lets them move over the sky, until they die through her power in the west. A good example of this matriarchal concept of the cosmos is the Egyptian goddess Nut, the Goddess of Heaven. She gives birth to her son Re, the sun, every morning, and devours him every evening, only to give birth to him again at the next sunrise.

In the cosmos and on the earth, matriarchal people observe this cycle of life, death and rebirth. According to the matriarchal principle of connection between macro-cosm and micro-cosm, they see the same cycle in human life. Human existence is not different from the cycles of nature; it follows the same rules. Their concept of nature and of the human world lacks the dualistic, patriarchal way of thinking that separates „spirit“ and „nature“ or „society“ and „nature“.

Furthermore, it lacks the dualistic concept of morality that defines what is „good“ and splits off what is „evil“. From the matriarchal perspective, life brings forth death, and death brings forth life again – everything in its own time. If everything is necessary in its own time, the drastic opposition of „good“ and „evil“ makes no sense. In the same way, the female and the male also are a cosmic polarity. It would never occur to a matriarchal people to regard one sex as inferior or weaker to the other, as it is common in patriarchal societies.

The entire view of the world of matriarchal people is structured non-dualistically. They make no essential distinction between the profane and the sacred. The entire world with all ‘her’ appearances is divine and, therefore, sacred to the people. They respect and venerate nature as holy, and they would never exploit and destroy it. For example, every house is sacred and has its holy hearth as a place where the living and the ancestors meet together. And each daily task and common gesture has a symbolic meaning, every action is ritualized. Therefore, on the cultural level, I call matriarchies *sacral societies* or *cultures of the Goddess*.

Summary of the criteria of the matriarchal society

- *Economic criteria*: societies with self-supporting gardening or agriculture; land and house are property of the clan, no private property; women have the power of disposition over the source of nourishment; constant adjustment of the level of wealth by the circulation of the vital goods in form of gifts at festivals – **societies of reciprocity**.
- *Social criteria*: matriarchal clans, which are held together by matrilinearity and matrilocality; mutual marriage between two clans; visiting marriage with additional sexual freedom for both sexes; social fatherhood – **non-hierarchical, horizontal societies of kinship**.

- *Political criteria*: principle of consensus in the clan-house, on the level of the village, and on the regional level; delegates as bearers of communication, not as decision-takers; absence of classes and structures of domination – **egalitarian societies of consensus**.
- *Cultural criteria*: concrete belief in rebirth into the same clan; cult of ancestresses and ancestors; worship of Mother Earth and the Goddess of Cosmos; divinity of the entire world; absence of dualistic world view and morality; everything in life is part of the symbolic system – **sacral societies as cultures of the Goddess**.

English translation: Solveig Göttner, Karen Smith

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Biographical Note

In 1986, Heide Göttner-Abendroth founded the *INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY HAGIA for Modern Matriarchal Studies and Matriarchal Spirituality* (situated in Western Germany), and since then she has served as the director.

In 2003, she organized and led the first *World Congress on Matriarchal Studies* in Luxemburg.

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