

Lakota Elder Russell Means Says Matriarchy Is the Answer to a World in Crisis

Talk at Stanford Offers Wisdom Teachings

by Marguerite Rigoglioso, Ph.D.

A society without disgruntled citizens, war, and in-law problems? Sound too good to be true? In fact, it's been the way of life of many peoples around the world who enjoy a matriarchal social structure, among them the Lakota of North America. So asserted Russell Means, a Lakota who has been hailed as "the most famous Native American since Sitting Bull," speaking at Stanford University on April 14, 2011.

Providing first-hand testimony that echoed many of the observations of Heide Goettner-Abendroth, the founder and leading academic theorist of modern matriarchal studies, Means, who holds a doctorate in indigenous studies, affirmed that matriarchies are societies of peace because they are based on consensus decision-making, not "majority rule." They are societies of sustainability, because they are based on "natural law," working in harmony and respect with the growth cycles of the earth. They are societies of emotional health, because they are based on a profound respect for women's life-giving and nurturing role. This is hardly the stereotypical image portrayed in art, the media, and academia of matriarchy as a fictional men's hell.

Women as Source

Means began his discussion of the importance of matriarchies as a source of guidance in a troubled world by articulating the basis of all matriarchal societies: awe for the woman as life giver. He observed that the calibration of the human gestation period of 280 days with great astronomical cycles indicates "the woman is in rhythm with the entire universe." "Men get in rhythm by honoring the female," he said.

Conflict Resolution through Mothering Values: Deep Listening and Respect

Speaking about the Lakota, in particular, he noted that the matriarchal social structure affords "instant conflict resolution." "The clan system solves problems in days, if not hours, and everyone comes away feeling good about themselves," he observed. This is because every problem and decision is taken into counsel and worked until unanimous consent is reached. "Even if it takes you sometimes a year to reach a decision, you have no one disgruntled and talking behind your back — because everyone has come to agreement."

"We never made the mistake of adopting democracy," Means asserted. "Majority rules means a minority suffers, and that minority must endure it until they become a majority. If that is civilization, I'm uncivilized."

Implying that all indigenous cultures were originally matriarchal, he maintained, "No weapons of war from a pre-Colombian grave have been found."

Working in Harmony with Nature as Mother

As a matriarchy, the Lakota follow the principle of "natural law," he said, "which means that when you need a tipi pole, you ask the tree, the earth, and all the creatures and plant life around it for permission. If you want deer meat, corn, grass for a skirt, you must ask permission and ask for forgiveness." Natural law, he said, also means that you don't completely destroy a beehive and the queen when you want honey, and you don't decimate a bush by eating all of its berries. "Living with life is a lot more scientific than living without it," he commented. "It requires powers of observations, patience, and the applications of the teachings of the ancestors."

A matriarchal social structure also promotes social harmony, Means said, in that a husband and wife do not have to answer to their respective mothers-in-law. The life of the wife continues to center around her mother's longhouse, and the husband does not presume to get involved in those affairs. "No mother-in-law problems!" he exclaimed humorously.

Sufferings under Patriarchy

The dislocations and traumas imposed upon the Lakota and other peoples by patriarchal Europeans have severely impaired such societies from being able to function normally, Means, a long-time activist for Native American rights, reported sadly. On the Lakota reservation, where he lives, the average life expectancy is 48 years, unemployment is 87 percent, the school dropout rate is 70 percent (starting in grade school), and the suicide rate is the highest in the world. "But that's where my people are and where natural law still functions, and I love my people," he said. "They're worth saving."

How we may support the restoration of matriarchies that have been thusly assaulted — and how we may apply lessons from matriarchal societies to current global problems — has been the ongoing work of modern matriarchal studies, under the leadership of Heide Goettner-Abendroth, and the gift economy movement, under the leadership of Genevieve Vaughan, for several decades. Conferences, a book of essays, university courses, and a specialized listserv in which members of matriarchal societies, scholars, activists, artists, and others have contributed attest to the energy around these topics and the hope they offer for the future. See more below.

More on Matriarchies, Past, Present, and Future

Visit Russell Means' Websites: <http://www.russellmeans.com/> and <http://www.russellmeansfreedom.com/about/>

To join the campaign to promote matriarchal values worldwide, consider signing the newly penned Matriarchal Manifesta <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/1/matriarchal-manifesta/>

Check out the congress on matriarchal politics, Switzerland, May 12 weekend (forthcoming): <http://kongress-matriarchatspolitik.ch/?lang=en>

Visit the Second world congress on matriarchal studies site (with audios and videos of many of the presentations): <http://www.second-congress-matriarchal-studies.com/>

See also the first world congress on matriarchal studies (with links to the Hagia Akademia website, which coordinates much activity on matriarchal studies): <http://www.hagia.de/de/program/conferences/1st-world-congress-on-matriarchal-studies-luxembourg.html>

Read the book Societies of Peace, with essays on matriarchies worldwide: <http://www.amazon.com/SOCIETIES-PEACE-MATRIARCHIES-PRESENT-FUTURE/dp/0978223357>

Introduction to the Gift Economy (with articles by Gen Vaughan and others, as well as conference links): <http://www.gift-economy.com/theory.html>

Courses on matriarchal societies will be taught at the California Institute of Integral Studies (Marguerite Rigoglioso) and the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (Vicki Noble, Marguerite Rigoglioso) in fall 2011, under the auspices of their respective Women's Spirituality programs.

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