



## Introduction

*(English)*

**MARIE-FRANÇOISE GUÉDON, PhD**

**with Linnéa Rowlatt, PhD, and Angela Sumegi, PhD**

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Mythmaking and Storytelling Among Matricultures.*

When we take the cultural components of a society concerning women and motherhood, directly or indirectly, as a cultural system, that is to say the matricultural, it becomes evident that this system intrudes into every nook and cranny of the general cultural context or what we call culture, including its myths and its oral or written literature, its arts and its religion, and its entire worldview. As researchers, then, are we able to develop a better understanding of the vitality and orientations of the matricultural system in a given society by evaluating the presence and role of women in the myths conveyed by this society?

However, myths are neither simple nor monolithic. First, they present themselves in various ways and find many modes of expression, particularly in the arts, rituals, and, of course, religion; they are never explicit like science or history. They are not to be taken literally either and it is less the stories they tell than the way they tell them which is their essential gift. For Gregory Bateson, in his Introduction to *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*,



myths offer foremost - and well beyond the adventures of the story they tell - a way of thinking by demonstrating the particular principles of thought in this or that society.

For example, according to anthropologist Edmund Leach's understanding of the perspective of Claude Lévi-Strauss, well known for his contributions to the study of myths and to structural anthropology, myths have as one of their functions not to explain or provide answers to the major questions that a society asks itself, but, rather, simply to propose these questions. In particular, the myths will neutralize contradictions at the heart of worldviews by making it possible to state these contradictions, to talk about them without having to resolve them, and to highlight them under the guise of metaphors and narratives which become justifications for the current state of the debate.

Myths and stories tell people how to think about their past and how to express their present, but in so doing they give those who listen to them tools to formulate new interpretations and re-interpretations. For instance, when the position of women and the play of kinship in which they are necessarily involved become ambiguous, the myth becomes the bearer of the questions which then arise. From myths and their derivatives, can we propose a matricultural hermeneutics that would examine the manner in which women's lives, with their perceptions of the world, of themselves, and of the way they are perceived by the rest of society, are organized and reorganized in a broader cultural context?

The answer to this question, however, is not obvious. In a simpler context, one could conceive of myths as founding texts that serve as general references and give clear guidance. But myth is never so simple. Even a formal and codified text like that of the biblical Ten Commandments has several versions, some with three or five commandments, sometimes ten or more, even up to seventeen. This is because, even in their written form, consecrated and frozen by elites and scribes who can control access, myths and their derivatives in artistic works, ritual acts, and religious discourses, among others, are not static. They exist to be told and retold, written and re-written, alluded to in conversation and song, and passed down from generation to generation, and despite the efforts made to keep them identical to themselves, they bear the mark of those who tell them.

Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, among other researchers, have also demonstrated that a myth is not just a text. It is, above all, an almost theatrical performance in which the audience is directly invited to participate personally and in the present.

To add to the complexity and ambiguity of the context, a myth always comes in several versions. The temptation to identify an original or complete version of a myth is part of scholarly research traditions, but it is a misdirection. Followed by most mythologists / anthropologists working on the subject, in *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss

demonstrated that a myth is multifaceted and takes place in all the versions to which one can have access, declining a set of relations, oppositions, and correspondences which make up and confirm the structure of the text. It is the same basic myth which we follow in all its transformations, but there are no original versions – only a multiplicity of stories in the making.

The structural approach to myth is disturbing because it embraces this multiplicity. It follows that myths, far from constituting simple explanatory models or primary references, are - on the contrary - changing, dynamic, and confusing. Even in their written forms, myths offer multiple interpretations and blur their metaphors. This is why the myths of the great religions, based as they are on written texts, always appeal to commentaries which will add an additional layer of ambiguity.

This does not mean that myths are not important; quite the opposite is true. While they enshrine ways of thinking and perceiving the world in its human, natural, invisible, or spiritual dimensions, they also justify our behaviour. We are able to see what myths hold true for people in the world today from their decisions and actions.

Oriented by great fundamental principles, even if these are often hidden in the unspoken, structured by references that cross borders, myths speak to us and they form an essential element of culture in general and the matricultural in particular. Myths are used to frame our ways of thinking and, therefore, our lives, but the framework is plural and does not often correspond to everyday life. It is available in several versions which do not often reflect the lived reality.

We know a large number of societies governed by more than one mythological system, including matrilineal societies, where, for example, several religious systems have been layered on top of each other through historical circumstances. For specific examples, we are thinking of the Berber people of North Africa, who had to adjust to Islam as brought by the Arabs, or the Tsimshian people on the Canadian Pacific coast, where Christianity was imposed without being able to replace the ancient matrilineal social structures. As general examples, where an aristocratic social class develops formal traditions while the common people prefer another version of the world or where men are organized into patrilineal lineages while women continue to live in matrilineal clans. There are bicultural and multicultural societies as much as bilingual or multilingual ones.

Indeed, like myths, it is cultural systems in general which become confused under the cover of order. As students of the cultural, despite our efforts to collect and present logical and normative cultural systems, from kinship to political authority, from religious to stylistic traditions, it is the cultural that presents itself less as a set of explicit norms and traits and more as a geographical map allowing for a multitude of routes, although always within a framework limited by the terms of reference. However, “(t)he map is not the

territory,” said the semanticist Alfred Korzybski (founder of General Semantics); the words are not the things and we find ourselves circumscribed by the way we speak. We also forget that the terms *culture*, *matriculture*, or even *society*, are concepts or labels rather than solid realities. Nevertheless, our lived experience goes far beyond the cultural, even if the cultural is constructed in such a way that we could take it for the totality of reality, a reality that it presents to us as univocal, universal, and unequivocal. Even anthropology, the discipline closest to questions of culture, has had to take up metaphorical terms such as weaving, interbreeding, tinkering, symbiosis, or syncretism to approach perspectives on concrete societies that are better fitted to lived reality – even though our current societies, in their political and administrative expressions, are still looking for singular identities, closed nationalisms, and unilingual states.

Motivated and driven by the basic, concrete needs of their families, conscious of both the ‘strangeness’ of the Other, of its multiplicity, and of the passage of time, as Mary Catherine Bateson has shown, women - especially those who are responsible for the survival of their families - are perhaps more sensitive than other people to the potential mismatch between what the cultural context offers them and what really happens in their lives. The matricultural would then offer an occasional, momentary glimpse of the other side of the cultural, of the nameless.

The collection of texts and images assembled in this issue illustrates how the matricultural, as a cultural system (like the cultural in general), moves from one level to another, from one theme to another, from one anecdote to another. Moreover, this small but representative sample of various cultures confirms that in every cultural community, women do indeed face a changing multiplicity of definitions, norms, and relationships. Although they share a common theme, namely the engagement of the feminine in the mythological and associated fields such as art and ritual, these works, coming as they do from different cultural backgrounds, also illustrate different approaches which are conceived from various definitions of fundamental cultural concepts such as *woman*, *feminine*, *femininity*, and *motherhood*. But beyond cultural and methodological differences, whether scholarly and sophisticated in their data and analyses or stemming from a local popular discourse, whether they express personal experiences and points of view or whether they reiterate the political discourse of the state, this sample of testimonials represents the cultural in general and confirms a disturbing and often forgotten attribute of lived culture: the cultural is messy.

Our primary question, therefore, should not be about the possibility of learning anything about women in a given society from its myths. Rather, it should address the possibility of finding ways of thinking and speaking about that lived culture in all its disorder. And, first, to attempt to find and perceive the cultural as lived by women and mothers without going through the Cultural with a capital C, most often summarized, reified, and considered masculine by default. Then, to rediscover the possibility of considering several versions of

culture and the matricultural, not to find the most acceptable, the most interesting, or the one that has the most value, but to account for the resulting multiplicity.

Communities accessed by researchers often insist that the researcher report a watered-down version, correct in every sense of the word and approved by the elite. However, the cultural continues to exist for all members of society; it is not limited to the elite, nor to the wise or the *connaisseurs*. The juxtaposition of various versions of a myth can, moreover, make it possible to identify lineages or groups, each preserving its own version. It may also be that in some cultures the need to establish formal or generalized norms is overlooked. In her account of her experiences among the Mosuo people of southwestern China, 'Following Gemu: Journeys Around a Mosuo Goddess,' Tami Blumenfield highlights both the complexity of the cultural context and the multiplicity of versions of the founding myth which, while presenting notable differences, are nevertheless all recognized as valuable by the Mosuo community. The goddess Gemu is, it seems, part of a culture characterized by 'open and non-linear' thought, some of whose implications and benefits in a decentralized society Blumenfield describes.

The matricultural, including maternity as it does, is essential to every society, bearer as it is of the survival of the group; perhaps it is more multifaceted than other cultural systems, since it must adapt at all costs to changes in circumstances. In many cases, the matricultural is also explicitly linked to responsibility for cultural survival and, therefore, for the cultural heritage essential to the community's continuity. Under these conditions, one can understand why the matricultural is an early target of religious cultural systems of which the matricultural system is, at the same time, a visible expression, a guarantor, and a transmitter (even in its most negative or pathological forms). We could hypothesize that the matricultural, even more than other cultural systems and in order to fulfill its functions, must therefore participate in all the workings of society and take on a multiplicity of forms and expressions.

In many societies, often those with a dualistic worldview, the question of gender will join the cosmological realm and then the universe will find itself exemplifying, and therefore justifying, the distinction between the masculine and the feminine. The Han Chinese worldview is an example of this. Another example is provided by one of our collaborators: in a surprising turn towards the arboreal, Rejeanne Lacroix, in her piece 'It Takes All Kinds of Trees to Make a Forest: Trees Associated with Feminine Folklore in the Eastern Slavic Folk Calendar,' explores the myths and stories of those trees deemed to be feminine by Eastern Slavs and their relationships with women. Nature becomes the model and justification for the relationship between the genders in Eastern Slavic societies. However, the presence of two genders (female and male) in cosmology and, therefore, mythology, does not mean an egalitarian relationship between the two sexes, since this relationship is often hierarchical in one way or another.

This multiplicity, together with the dynamism inherent in the matricultural, reinforces the complexity of the system and sometimes weakens the normative expressions of *feminine* and *motherhood* in societies. But neither multiplicity nor recognition of the matricultural are sufficient to provide alternatives for women struggling with miserable living conditions or oppressive norms. The complexity or even the opacity of the cultural system can generate a heavy social burden which translates at the level of the whole of society into a general cultural impoverishment when people have to navigate differently in this environment according to their experience, their social status, their social ties, and their degree of personal autonomy. On the other hand, this same complexity can become an essential factor for adaptation when change is imposed or inevitable. People then may have recourse to almost forgotten practices, to new interpretations of essentials, or to new ways of doing things rooted in enduring underlying principles.

According to Anthony Giddens, one essential form of power is the ability 'to make one's account count.' For instance, I may not have the choice to disobey a father's order, but I am able to claim the right to register my opposition to that order and to tell my own version of the story. The texts presented in this volume all relate accounts, sometimes personal, sometimes historical, sometimes political, which register that claim. With different modes of telling, retelling, or rewriting the stories that construct us, they bear witness to the power embedded in sharing testimonials.

Consequentially, when the dominant group, whether defined by caste, gender, social class, or other, neglects and eventually no longer perceives those subordinate, who - in their eyes - do not count, this blindness can allow the subordinate group(s) to keep intact their version of myths, stories, history, and worldview, and to maintain or develop their own values in relative invisibility (for example, the case of Korean women's shamanism). When these groups manage to survive, they sustain cultural continuity and identity for their entire community. This is how the great religious myths, in their written and official versions, often cohabit with popular versions, often oral, which develop away from the elites.

In 'The Wish of the Mother: Re-writing Desire into Sacred Narratives in *Yaśodharāvata* and the *Purāṇa Vessantara Jātaka Kāvya*,' Phusathi Liyanaarachchi explores conflicting versions of texts alluding to motherhood in relation to the advent of Buddhism. She questions the role of Māyā, the mother of the Buddha, in the classical versions, and notes that her death in childbirth, a precondition for Siddhartha's Enlightenment, accompanies a rejection of mothers from the Buddhist canon. Alongside these great classical texts where motherhood is sidelined, Liyanaarachchi introduces us to poetic cycles of Sinhalese folklore which reframe the canonical narratives by centering on Māyā's stated wishes, thereby emphasizing the importance of the maternal. This then enables the figure of Māyā to resist the erasure and the submersion of mothers in written textual traditions.

Since each human society has had to develop a form of matriculture, the matricultural is more or less visible, more or less shared than its male counterpart, and more or less well-transmitted across the generations. Indeed, each of our contributors approaches the matricultural from some different chosen element, each time retracing its evolution, loss, or transformation. Heide Goettner-Abendroth, for example, searches for patterns of the prehistoric divine feminine and her partner, the sacred king or *heros*, in international fairy tales. With these, she illustrates the erosion of once flourishing matricultural systems as the societies that housed them were overcome by patriarchal societies. The myth becomes folklore and yields to the pressures of the victors and, yet, the tales endure.

Reconstructing a historical space closer to us, Patrick Jung's study 'Traces of the Feminine: Matriculture in the Traditional Ho-Chunk Life World' outlines the resilience of the matricultural system among the Ho-Chunk, a Siouan language-speaking Indigenous people of North America. His work shows that while the Ho-Chunk developed a patrilineal kinship system in the seventeenth century that would replace the ancient matrilineal system (in order to better adapt themselves to the new economic and political context established by the European colonizers), many components of the ancient matriculture would survive to the present day. Supported by oral traditions, these are especially to be found in a strongly feminine cosmology, an occasional bilinear kinship system, and strong avuncular kinship ties.

The matriculture of a society is not always replaced by that of newcomers, and the coexistence of systems of thought or cultural systems from different periods or brought by distinct groups is no longer in question. This is the perspective developed by Arantzazu Saratxaga Arregi in 'The Matrixiality of the Earth in the Basque Worldview.' Here again, we are witnessing the re-creation - if not the re-invention - of mythology. In the case of the Basques, this process unfolds from ancient concepts which pre-date the arrival of Indo-European speaking peoples; these can still be accessed by means of a re-signification of symbolic expressions of Basque matriculture and by their enduring meanings in the context of a Basque worldview.

With similar results but on another scale and following a different process, one of negotiation and creativity, Etim Ekpenyoung Mfon, in his article 'The Influence of Christian Religion on the Rite of Passage of Ikwe-ezi in Mgbidi of Imo State, Nigeria,' examines the juxtaposition of African Christianity and pre-Christian customs in the traditional rite-of-passage for puberty-aged girls among the Mgbidi people of southwestern Nigeria. What colonizers desired to be the replacement of the Indigenous ritual with a Christian feast was not a smooth process, but negotiations allowed traditionalists to highlight, beyond the ritual details and individual and family interests, the underlying and essential question about the well-being of the community. The fertility of the land (and, therefore, the survival of the villages) was and is considered to be in intimate relationship with the purity and morality of the girls, qualities which the traditional rituals guaranteed. Once the

essential link between the girls and the land had been accepted by the Christians, by preserving the symbols it was possible to develop a compromise which allowed the rituals to continue, although in new ways. Further, to adapt not only to the presence of Christianity, but also to a society in the process of urbanization and emigration, illustrated here by images which reveal the vitality of a tradition that adapts.

Along with the questions and issues raised by academic research, the poetic texts and paintings included in this issue bring us to another level of discourse. As Edward Sapir liked to remind us, the cultural only exists in the minds of the people who experience it, or in the summaries of observers, whether local people or visitors; there is no culture without an individual to think it. Similarly, the matricultural will find its most convincing expressions in the people who live them and who testify to it, of whatever gender. Here is where we witness culture in the making and where matriculture reveals itself as a process and a relationship, and certainly not a collection of items, information, or even symbols. The process is a life-generating one of creativity, of connection, and of sharing – and it takes place at the individual level. All cultural systems are engaged in this same process.

In 'Mosuo Love: An Eight-Poem Collection,' the love songs composed by Banamu, an artist who belongs to a Mosuo matrilineage in southwestern China, are offered to us as testimonies of a personal journey intertwined or woven with cultural resources gleaned over the course of a lifetime framed by a matrilineal, quasi-matriarchal system experienced and assumed by the men and women of her society. These songs are a passionate plea for the quality of a cultivated life and give us a sense of the vitality that animates a society where women can openly sing about their individual freedom.

Yang Lifan, from the same Mosuo ethnic group in China, carried by the same matrilineal society and the same freedom, tells us in 'Mosuo Songs and Dances: From the Villages to the University Campus' how she took responsibility for preserving the Mosuo songs that she collected, transcribed, and adapted to the modern – if not international – world. Her work is much more than a collection of songs resulting from a collection of folk documents; this carefully documented personal quest led her to bring together childhood village life and academia, Mosuo oral literature and European classical music, and family rituals and state-organized performances, transforming them in order to better preserve the symbolic and artistic expressions of her Mosuo community. The results are an explosive affirmation of her personal and cultural identity, demonstrating forcefully that a strong cultural context enriches itself during contact with others, rather than losing its roots.

Margaret Kress comes from a hybrid society where the juxtaposition of various cultural heritages has become an explicit part of the cultural fabric. As a Métis person in Canada, a culture born from multiple encounters between the Algonquian-speaking tribes of central Canada (including the Cree peoples) and the European fur-traders, Kress describes herself



as a Michif woman 'who honours her Michif, French, English, and German ancestors.' Her account, poem, and painting all revolve around the shared mythological being of the Rougarou, himself a composite trickster uniting such distant figures as the French Loup Garou and the Cree Windigo, the antithesis of a human being. However, in the human beings he encounters, the Rougarou brings out the potential for the eminently human quality of compassion.

Moreover, seen from the outside, Michif society shares with its Indigenous neighbours a characteristic that sets it apart from the dominant Canadian society: these Métis and Indigenous societies usually have not yet professionalized their artists and cultural contributors. Even though the role of Elders and political leaders is increasingly formal, everyone in the community is invited to participate in the creative life of the group, can contribute a song, a poem, an embroidery or beadwork design. Experience and competence are recognized but do not coalesce into monopolies of creativity. The egalitarian ethos that was brought by the people of Algonquian language families penetrates the whole matricultural system, at the same time as the old recognition of genders other than masculine and feminine gives it a particular fluidity. The last is embodied in the semi-mythical figure of Roogarou, who can change shape and gender, sometimes monstrous, sometimes almost human, bordering on the visible and the invisible. In her personal account of her engagement with her cultural identity, Kress demonstrates that the socio-cultural human context of any society is not to be assumed. It requires the active participation of members of that society and the matricultural system is no exception.

Coming from a different society and another continent, bearing the marks of a patriarchal past and the influence of writing as the dominant medium of communication, Robert DiNapoli is similarly personally engaged in retracing the roots of his cultural world as a scholar, but also, therefore, as a member of his learned community. In his personal reflections on the theme of mythmaking and matriculture, entitled 'Who Saw Her First? The Tangled Sight-Lines of Medieval Romance and Marian Piety,' he is bridging elements from the Middle Ages with later interpretations and present-day consequences revolving around a key figure of the Western European matriculture, the Blessed Virgin Mary. His reflections exemplify one essential process in the creation and maintenance of a matricultural context: remembrance. Whether by telling and retelling myths, stories, or anecdotes, whether by inscribing texts on stone, clay, or paper, whether by staging them in dance, theatre, or ritual, whether by combing archives and interpreting images, a matricultural system has to be remembered. The myths and their expressions play a key role in bringing old elements to the surface and preserving enduring modes of thinking.

Matricultural systems are neither born nor maintained exclusively by and for women. They result from the actions and choices made by the whole society, including its male members. A rich, vibrant, and supportive matricultural system needs more than people; it

demands the attention and care of those who are able to renew it generation after generation, those who can transmit it and find new modes of expression, as well as those who allow themselves to resist, transform, and adapt it, or openly transgress its norms, and those who enthusiastically embark on a quest to trace and retell its most important myths.

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Ste-Étienne-de-Bolton

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