



## Introduction

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When, in the mid twentieth century, women became an important, then essential, topic in social and human sciences, the research was habitually focused on the question: What is the role - or status - or function - of women in this or that society or culture? From Margaret Mead onwards, a good ethnographic monograph had to contain at least one chapter on women's lives and contributions to the community. Later, if only to satisfy feminist critics, it became mandatory for most social sciences projects to mention the voice of women, so contributing to the slow emergence of women's lives from an essentially male world, and women's perspectives from an essentially male gaze. The initial question focusing on the status of women in a community, society or culture, however, implies that women are part of a larger essentially masculine whole on which they depend for their existence, or from which they derive their identity and definition (even when this ensuing development is not intended by the researcher). What is implied becomes more obvious when we reverse the question and ask instead: "In this culture or society, what is the role - or status, or function - of men?"

In most cultures composing the contemporary world, such a question is not part of the habitual way of thinking. Yet some cultures do function in this mode and present themselves as societies where the men's world is explicitly derived from the women's world. And not a few cultures, most of which are Indigenous and matrilineal, are comfortable with the above question but understand it as leading to the attribution of valued responsibilities and active roles to every gender in a world where all genders are actively involved in the making and sustaining of the cultural and social milieu, either because gender differentiation is not considered important or is limited to people's adulthood, or because complementarities rather than hierarchies inform the dominant values.

Following the lead of Nicole-Claude Mathieu in the study of matrilineal societies, a network of researchers gathered after her death to carry her project forward. Over the past fifteen years, we combed the anthropological, historical, and, more generally, social sciences literature, contacted matrilineal societies, questioned established notions, and formulated research agendas. With researchers coming from all continents, from various disciplines and professional paths, and from matrilineal communities themselves, we now compose a network, dispersed as it is, in need of



formal means of shared communication and of a stable concrete base for guests and passers-by. Hence this new journal.

Our engagement, as summarized by my questioning the usual approach about the status of women, places us in a marginal position (See Penny Harvey, *AYEC*: 5-8 for a discussion of the advantages of marginality) and we aim less at convincing the public at large, or even our colleagues, than at developing a framework which will allow us to speak about societies where it makes sense to ask: In this community, what is the status of men? And we have to affirm the existence of such societies.

Anthropology is the place where the questions we are asking and the terms we are using were first formulated. Our anthropological roots offer space for other disciplines and approaches. We also find ourselves sharing this space with thinkers coming from many different socio-cultural backgrounds.

Looking at the history of the social sciences, Postmodernism, then Deconstructionism and Post-Deconstructionism, Post-Colonialism, and of course, Feminism, to name only a few of the great intellectual currents of our times, have swept through Anthropology and brought irreversible changes to our perspectives and procedures. Women's Studies emerged, then underwent profound upheavals. Anthropologists questioned the existence of their discipline, reframed its central components, such as the notion of culture, and re-organized kinship studies in the light of new gender research in a critical process toward more reflexivity.

Yet the present conclusions of our research group lead to the admission that for all these intellectual and ideological interrogations and *mouvance*, we are not yet equipped for the task of describing and engaging with societies and cultures where both mothers and fathers have full access to the fabric of their community's life. In a strange twist of mind, while our disciplines have rejected, for the most part, theories of the mid-nineteenth century concerning women, we have not re-examined our terminology and still use terms and concepts inherited from scholars like Edward Burnett Tylor, Lewis Henry Morgan or Johann Jakob Bachofen to describe matrilineal societies (See Linnéa Rowlatt's *exploration of the historical antecedents of matrilineal studies, this issue*). While we are able to disentangle gender from sex and from the plurality inherent to both, we still find it difficult to examine matrilineal systems, or, worse, their cultural contexts, without pre-suppositions inherited from a century and an half ago. We easily speak about patriarchy, but we shy away from contemporary Indigenous societies whose people have borrowed from our past academic debates terms such as matriarchy or matricentricity to describe themselves.

The assumptions hidden in our basic terms of reference (what Rik Pinxten (1989) would call root principles) are ingrained in our languages and our thinking as researchers, if not in our lives, and are not easily questioned. They go without saying. Yet when we manage to examine or deconstruct them, or when we appose them to the worldviews of others, particularly those with whom we are conducting research, we may be brought to rewrite past ethnographies or to read them in a different light. Annette Weiner's ethnographic work among the Trobriand Islanders and Peggy Reeves Sanday's long-term ethnography with the Minangkabau in Sumatra are strong examples of what can then be achieved.

In our initial projects, we first attempted a kind of census, a simple list of matrilineal societies in the world. For the record, we started with about one hundred of them. We soon realized that the data presently available is not adequate to the task. Information about the presence of matrilineal societies was sometimes suppressed, often misunderstood, or simply not recorded. As a default label for the kinship system, the term bilateral was often preferred (See Guédon's interim report on *matrilineage in Algonquian-speaking societies, this issue*). As Nicole-Claude Mathieu suggested, matrilineality takes many forms and one observes, for instance, a number of societies with *de facto* local lineages deriving from matrilocality rules (the new couple moving to the wife's parents' home, or to the wife's mother, or each partner remaining at home in their respective mother's home). These are not recorded as lineage societies since they do not fit the traditional criteria for matrilineality. We met the debates of matriarchy and matriarchal theories, including those of the Germany-based scholars, together with modern Indigenous communities exploring the use of these terms to define themselves, and we wondered whether a great deal of confusion could be avoided by first (a) considering matrilineality as having to do with kinship, and matriarchy as having to do with governance (following Peggy Reeves Sanday's proposition), then (b) paying attention to the ways in which matriarchy is defined by the communities who use the term to describe themselves - regularly not as a mirror image of patriarchy but as an entirely different, less hierarchical system in which women play a central role while upholding the importance and value of all members of the society, including men. As noted by Christine Mathieu, this distinction between kinship and governance should also apply to patrilineal lineage systems and patriarchy, the latter being a 'system where men are responsible for governance'.

Other projects unveiled the role played by the cultural context associated with matrilineal systems. Forty years ago, for my PhD research, I visited northern North American Indigenous Athapaskan-speaking hunter-gatherer communities in order to explain how a semi-nomadic society could develop matrilineal clans. According to then-prevalent theories, such a system was to be found primarily among agriculturalists, such as the Iroquoian-speaking tribes in eastern North America, or else must have been borrowed from sedentary neighbors, such as the Northwest Coast maritime-based societies. I had to conclude, with Frederica de Laguna, that the Athapaskan hunters do not borrow their matrilineal exogamous clans and moiety systems from their neighbours. New visits to Alaska have since confirmed the flexibility and adaptive value of social arrangements that are owned by both men and women, and of related cultural traits. That is, that women are hunters; they are mobile, traveling on their own, babies and all, and, among the several traits contributing to the 'status' of women in that society, gender is more of an individual choice. These traits are not necessarily the result of a matrilineal system, but they appear to be part of a cultural set which supports a matri-clanic organization. Later, I worked with the Tsimshian-speaking Gitksan people of northern British Columbia, also a people with exogamous matrilineal lineages (*Wilp*, or Houses), clans, and phratries. Then, I visited the matrilineal Mosuo people in Yunnan and Sichuan. All my observations pointed to a pervasive link between the social system and the rest of the cultural context. Either matrilineality can penetrate large segments of culture, or matrilineality itself is only part of a larger cultural system which encompasses key aspects of culture in both its male and female expressions. Encounters with colleagues and with representatives of Indigenous communities have confirmed the urgency of a debate on matrilineal cultures.

To explore the potential links between the cultural context, and, more specifically, the worldview of matrilineal societies and their kinship or clan systems, we organized a series of workshops and conferences which brought together interested parties from both the academic world and Indigenous communities. People from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia joined us in two meetings; the first was hosted by the Southwestern University of Nationalities in Chengdu, Sichuan, China, and the second took place at the University of Ottawa, Canada. The international dimension is necessary because there are much fewer researchers interested in what used to be a mainstay of anthropology and ethnology than there are matrilineal cultures in the world today. These encounters resulted in the creation of the Global Matrilineal Research Network (MatNet), presented at the 2018 meeting of the Canadian Anthropological Society / Société canadienne d'anthropologie held in Cuba. Through these meetings, we strengthened three main methodological orientations:

- a) A precise ethnographic or ethnohistorical, linguistic, and comparative approach as our first reference;
- b) A shift from matrilineality as a kinship and social system to a cultural system – in Geertz' classical sense of the term – which emphasizes the cultural context in which such traits as matrilineality can arise, including the worldview and values or ethos of that context. For this, we introduced the term 'matriculture' to replace the narrower term 'matrilineal' as a focus of our research framework (*see Rowlatt's workshop report, this issue*); and
- c) A careful deconstruction and deep critique of the terms used by all concerned (whether ethnographers, politicians, Indigenous people, or academics) to describe and define, directly or indirectly, the cultural systems with which we are working (*see, for instance, the study by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure on the notions of duality and opposition as expressed in the Inuit traditions*).

Recognition of the role played by the culture *as a whole* in sustaining matricultural systems is liberating in more ways than one. In her list of potentially fertile developments to be considered, Nicole-Claude Mathieu had listed links between matrilineality and certain shamanic traditions, mythologies, birthing practices, gender definitions, or even cultural continuity. Most importantly, this recognition is explicit in what the Indigenous communities themselves are telling us: the principles outlining and supporting their clans and lineages or noble houses are also those by which they live and think about the world

What then is matriculture? A society could not survive without recognizing, at the very least, motherhood and womanhood, together with fatherhood and manhood, and without acknowledging the part played by women in constructing the world in which it exists. We use the expression 'matricultural system' to designate that part or those components of culture that sustain, express, and welcome women's participation in the socio-cultural fabric, whether it sustains a matrilineal kinship system or not. A matricultural system may be minimal and derivative, or it may be considered the essential source of its cultural context, with all variations in between

these two extremes. Whenever we meet a culture where the matricultural system is strong, where womanhood plays a central part, or where the world is at least a common enterprise for all genders, we describe it as a matriculture.

Methodologically speaking, looking at culture as if it were a male construct does not necessarily correspond to the reality in the field; it is simply a habit of thought. If we are not born members of a matriculture, this habit is a consequence of our own cultural roots. It prevents us from accessing and accounting for the lives of the many societies that are rooted in different assumptions. With matriculture in mind, we begin to question received ideas. For instance, we will not take for granted the universality of the notion of domesticity, even less of female domesticity opposed to a male public space; we will not assume the universality of the twin notions of Man the Hunter and woman the gatherer (or women staying at home). We will not assume that chiefs and leaders are everywhere male, with women stepping in only by default, or that power is everywhere defined in the same way. We will not assume that menstruations are everywhere marked as impure or enfeebling. We will not assume that nuclear families are more moral than extended families. These are a few examples of the many assumptions challenged over the course of our inquiries. Upon encountering them, we can, at the very least, inquire about the possibility of diverging propositions.

We have first to admit that societies with strong matricultures exist, that they are sustainable, and that they have existed as long as patrilineal or patriarchal societies. Then, as scholars, we must develop concepts which fit their realities; this will allow us to understand the terms of their engagement with the world. But first we have to listen to them. While many of these societies are either gone or endangered, they still continue to exist in sufficient number to be noticeable not as exceptions but, rather, as alternatives. Furthermore, they are not isolates or discrete entities closed upon themselves; they are not even cut off from the global world to which we are accustomed. Although these societies are all under threat, especially in their essential linguistic heritages, their members are engaged in global business and politics as modern humans. Finally, any preliminary research would demonstrate their immense diversity, even at the level of kinship organization and lineage definition. The generalizing definitions of matrilineal organizations which have been our tools until now are not adequate to the task.

There is a pedestrian quality to our research program and to this new journal. Precise ethnography, a reflexive approach, and the recognition of worldviews are basic ingredients of ethnology. Setting the records straight, or at least straighter, in an obscure corner of social sciences is hardly the stuff of revolution. Yet that corner is a window opened on different ways of thinking, and the locus for a great celebration welcoming cultural diversity in all its brilliance (in Redfield's term) and the enduring presence of Indigenous societies. You, our readers and partners, are invited to the feast.

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