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Matriliny as an archaeological problem. The view from social anthropology

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This valuable paper is on one level a measured defence of the work of the late Marija Gimbutas, the distinguished Lithuanian archaeologist and Indo-Europeanist. Perhaps more importantly, it also presents a critical review of the arguments archaeologists and others have used to interpret everything from female figurines to dwelling structures in terms of the social and cultural anthropology of kinship, often relying on sheer speculation. I come to this theme as a social anthropologist of kinship who has long been quietly sceptical of archaeological interpretations of dead societies in terms of living ones while recognizing how severely hampered archaeologists are by the vagaries, the presence and absence, of hard evidence for the form such dead societies took.

I have a number of comments to make, which should be considered supplementary to Cveček's study rather than critical of it. First, it is not entirely clear to me whether 'Aegean' includes what has been said about theories of matriliny in prehistoric Anatolia, e.g., the Lydians and their neighbours; certainly the accompanying map only shows sites on Crete and the west Aegean coast.

On the 'Mother Goddess' theme, other interpretations of female figurines as showing matriliny have, of course, been offered. Going out of area briefly, one famous example is of a female figurine found at Mohenjo-daro in the Indus Valley that depicts a woman who is nude apart from the bangles running the length of her left arm and who is standing with her right arm on her hip.

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There is nothing here that indicates a goddess, or even a respectable woman, and Craven (1976: 20; Fig. 11) suggests she might be a dancing girl, implying a connection with Indian temple sex workers. However, it is her provocative pose, not obviously sexual but certainly assertive, and anything but demur, that has stimulated scholarly ruminations that Indus Valley society was matrilineal. This recalls studies of prehistoric languages isolating a term for 'womb' or some other intrinsically female characteristic and deciding that the society was matrilineal because of its mere existence – as if women in other sorts of society lacked wombs! On the Mother Goddess theme, Sally Falk Moore long ago drew attention to the prevalence of myths of female founders among patrilineal societies (1964).

In the matter of ancient dwellings especially, of relevance to Cveček's work, it might be possible to gauge the size of a family from the size of its dwelling, but that does not allow its composition through ties of kinship to be determined without independent evidence. For example, quite exceptionally, we do have an idea about the typical family organization of ancient Greece or Rome, both literate societies that have left substantial bodies of texts behind them. That clearly does not apply to the bulk of cases of interest to archaeologists. And even in the case of DNA, while that may determine physical kinship, socially recognized kin ties may present a different picture, one that is normally irrecoverable by even the most advanced archaeological methods.

On descent, etc., one point that might be added to Cveček's careful account is that, far from always involving a kinship group that does things together – including living together – descent may simply be a category, possibly of kin who are spatially dispersed in opposition to the preferred mode of residence. A classic example of this situation is the Ndembu of Zambia, studied by Victor Turner (e.g. 1967), where matrilineally related kin live dispersed in patrilocal communities, giving rise to tensions between the two situations that can be seen as an aspect of the well-known 'matrilineal puzzle' (Richards 1950: 246). In this case, a future archaeologist might draw conclusions about descent from the evidence of dwellings but miss entirely cross-cutting ties that leave no physical evidence. Other anthropologists have seen descent as a matter of inheritance, as in Jack Goody's work (referenced by Cveček), where the notion of descent is routinely bound up in the inheritance and possession of property. Matrilocal residence, as Cveček properly notes, is not always linked to matrilineal descent. An important area in this respect is Amazonia, where descent per se is generally cognatic, but where men use their daughters to attract sons-in-law to help them farm (or garden). Moreover, there are many cases worldwide in which low-status men in a patrilineal society marry matrilocally, with their wives staying put in what to them is patrilocal residence, their fathers being the property owners. Even where matrilocal residence coincides with matrilineal descent, property ownership may not devolve on women. In kinship terminology, too, there is the risk of confusion: in particular, matrilineal kin are a different group than matrilateral kin, who also exist with patriliny; mother's brothers and their children and mother's fathers exist in all societies, after all.

The mention of gardening just now leads us to horticulture, which was also noted by Cveček and which was indeed a preferred explanation for matriliny for many of the contributors to the Schneider/Gough volume (1961), not without reason. However, many societies in Papua New Guinea are *patrilineal* horticulturalists, though it is still women who tend to do the work. As for hunter-gatherers, they frequently have the same descent systems as their settled neighbours, but certainly this is one type of society where the band comes into its own; a band is usually flexible in its membership, with it being possible for the members of one band to go off and join another in the event of a quarrel or if hunting opportunities seem better elsewhere. This, of course, severely complicates the tracing of kin ties within such communities. Another economic reason often given for matriliny, and touched on by Cveček, is the more or less long-term absence of husbands for economic reasons. One obvious example is deep-sea fishing. Many fishing communities at the present day allow more freedom to women, who may be left on land to process and sell the catch, at variance with the firmer gender dominance among many patrilineal farmers and pastoralists. However, this does not mean that descent is necessarily matrilineal, as shown by Brøgger's

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account of a Portuguese fishing village (1992), located within a society that is normatively patrilineal when it is not cognatic.

One property of matrilineal systems I have become particularly interested in is how they tend to be associated with a certain weakness in the marriage tie and therefore with higher rates of divorce than one would expect for patrilineal societies (Parkin 2020). The most famous case is probably the well-documented Nayar of Kerala, India, who formerly lived in large matrilineal extended families and had unusual reproductive arrangements that have led them to be seen as not having marriage at all, or at least as being the limit case. Here, women went through a ceremony with an upper-caste ritual husband to give them the status of married women and then took a series of casual lovers also from a higher caste, who would keep the Nayar family supplied with newborns. The *taravad* or extended family, being matrilineal, was headed by its senior male, the *karanavan*, upon whose death it devolved to the next senior male, his sister's son. Thus leadership devolved *through* women but *between* men. This is a salutary example of how women may still lack power in a matrilineal society, the difference from the patrilineal case being not in the amount of power they have but in the male relatives they must defer to – not fathers but mother's brothers, and not sons but sister's sons. This separates power from descent, whereas patriliny combines them in the same person (Nongbri 2010: 160). To return to the *taravad*, one might interpret it as a rare form of family that is not only matrilineal but also premised not on a husband–wife tie but a brother–sister tie. Most commentors on the Nayar have interpreted their social organization in terms of matrilineal descent, but Moore (1985) is a dissenting voice in seeing the *taravad* in residential rather than descent terms. Some societies have dual descent, matrilineal for some purposes and patrilineal perhaps in political leadership.

Other matrilineal examples are less extreme than the Nayar, though there is one analogue: the Mosuo of Yunnan, China (Nongbri 2010). Both groups also exemplify another well-known though not particularly prevalent practice, even in matrilineal societies, namely the 'visiting husband' phenomenon, whereby men spend their days with their sisters working the latter's land but return to their wives' homes at night. The only difference in the Nayar case was that male visitors copulated with Nayar women and promptly departed again, not even sleeping over. As for the Mosuo, Nongbri makes it clear that women are just as much the drudges in domestic work as their patrilineal counterparts and that men are still associated with prestigious activities such as Buddhism and horsemanship. However, that does not mean that women lack their own strategies, even in what appear to be strongly patrilineal and patriarchal environments, a good summary of which can be found in a paper by Sharon Tiffany (1978). Nor does it exclude the possibility of individual strong-minded women being able to exert practical dominance even in societies where social rules and norms indicate they should not. One of the insights of social anthropology is the disruptive potential of breaking such rules and norms.

The foregoing shows that a lot has been written about the alleged instability of matrilineal systems, but this is also partly because men may be more concerned with leaving property to their sons than their sister's sons and partly because of the allegedly greater divorce rates in matrilineal societies, another example of the tensions that arise from the 'matrilineal puzzle'. In some present-day matrilineal societies there are legal pressures on matrilineal inheritance to go patrilineal or cognatic, as among the Fanti in Ghana (Kronenfelt 2009), and mission or colonial government pressure to convert has been another source of instability. Mary Douglas argued decades ago (1969) that, in opposition to a common evolutionist myth, matriliny is giving way to patriliny and that it would be unlikely for new matrilineal systems to emerge in the present day. However, her claim is negated by one or two rare examples, e.g., Herlihy (2007) writing on a shift to matriliny in a Nicaraguan fishing village on the Mosquito coast (cf. above, the Portuguese case). Here, we apparently see matriliny emerging for the first time in this society: other examples show the persistence with which matriliny may continue, despite outside pressures to change (e.g. Apte 2012).

Some of the foregoing might not be especially relevant to Cveček's concerns, but there is another issue, also discussed by Mary Douglas (1969), that might have relevance for archaeologists. Given their discoveries of some burials as belonging to wealthier individuals than others because of the

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quality and amount of grave goods they contain, a possible relationship between mode of descent and level of wealth might be mooted. However, while Douglas emphasizes poverty, she in fact finds matriliny both where there is poverty and where there is wealth (on the latter, she cites Polly Hill's 1963 work on matrilineal cocoa farmers in Ghana), depending on context and/or society. Here, too, the risks of being misled into positing false characteristics for prehistoric peoples, many of whom we cannot even identify, should therefore make us cautious.

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Fostering interdisciplinary dialogues

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My article proposes that the 'notion of gender-egalitarian societies and socio-cultural anthropological insights should be consulted to avoid the process of rethroning, namely a priori associating

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