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Matrilineal kinship in Aegean prehistory: not a game of thrones

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Abstract
In response to the article written by Sabina Cveček, it is argued that the view expressed by the author that matrilineal kinship has been 'throned' and 're-throned' in Aegean prehistory has resulted from a poor understanding of anthropological terms. It is also proposed that archaeological perspectives on matrilineal kinship cannot be 'streamlined' through the contribution of social anthropology and ethnography as both fields are plagued by their own limitations.

Keywords: Kinship; matriliny; gender; evolutionism; Archaeology; Anthropology

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The article by Sabina Cveček succeeds in illustrating the complexity of kinship systems, as they relate in diverse ways to descent and gender relations. Furthermore, the ethnographic examples employed in the article can help archaeologists disentangle kinship, gender and descent and use the terms appropriately in their study of past societies.

As an archaeologist specializing in Aegean prehistory, however, I disagree with the view expressed by the author that the 'throning' and 're-throning' of matrilineal kinship has resulted from the poor understanding of anthropological terms. I also propose that archaeological perspectives on matrilineal kinship cannot be 'streamlined' through the contribution of social anthropology and ethnography as both fields are plagued by their own limitations.

The evolutionary past of matrilineal kinship

In the following paragraphs I suggest that the original 'throning' of matrilineal kinship in Aegean prehistory resulted from evolutionary ideology in archaeology, which was introduced through anthropology, and not from archaeologists' naïveté towards anthropological terms.

In archaeology, the hypothesis for prehistoric matrilineal kinship is closely connected to evolutionary theory and gender relationships have been regarded as indicators for kinship systems. The perceived shift from women's to men's leading role, therefore, has been corresponded to successive stages of social development, a trend that can be traced to early evolutionary models (Mina 2015, 181–2). For example, McLennan in *Primitive Marriage* (1865) linked the shift from matriliny to patriliny to the eventual emergence of states (Fedigan 1986, 28), whereas Morgan in *Ancient Society* (1877) and Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) placed matriliny at a less advanced stage than patriliny (Kuper 1988, 60). The replacement of matriliny with patriliny was considered in 19th century models as a pre-requisite for the emergence of the state, the culmination of complex and civilized society (Kuper 1988, 71).

The link between evolutionary theory and the attribution of matrilineal forms of kinship to earlier, and thus primitive, stages of social organization betray the heavy influence of androcentric views (Mina 2015, 182). The survival of evolutionary approaches in archaeology is also demonstrated by the association of more technologically advanced stages of human history with the transition to patrilineal descent and patriarchy. Ironically, the association of women with simpler forms of past social organization derived from ethnographic studies, since archaeologists found it difficult to detect such patterns in the archaeological record (Nelson 1997, 319). Ethnographers' observations, however, are no longer treated as objective data, and it is now widely accepted that societies under study had for a long time constituted part of the same economic system that continues to oppress women (Leacock 1978, 247; Wotela and Moultire 2008, 9–10).

Support in favour of matrilineal kinship in Neolithic societies, which was violently replaced by patriarchy, has also been offered by proponents of the Mother-Goddess theory (e.g., Gimbutas 1991, 352, 365). Although such models aimed at reinstating women in human history, nevertheless, they helped bolster evolutionary approaches to past societies. Archaeologists' reactions on epistemological merits to Gimbutas' Mother-Goddess theory subsequently questioned the matriliny hypothesis in past societies. Although the author describes the phenomenon as 'dethroning' matrilineal kinship in Aegean prehistory, I would argue that it does not demonstrate a polemical attitude on the part of archaeologists to annihilate matrilineal kinship *per se*. The critique of Gimbutas' work coincides largely with the post-processual era and the development of gender archaeology which helped expose the influence of gender and evolutionary biases on archaeological narratives.

Rather than attributing the different attitudes towards matrilineal kinship to processes of 'dethroning' and 're-throning', I would view them respectively as reflecting predominantly the influence of evolutionary perspectives and the challenge of past interpretations through an analytical and self-critical lens. I do not share the author's view, therefore, that archaeologists' limited understanding of anthropological terms or ethnographic parallels is responsible for the varied attitudes towards matriliny.

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Les liaisons dangereuses

The author suggests that archaeologists' familiarization with the terms kinship, gender, and descent as defined in socio-cultural anthropology can prevent the reiteration of erroneous interpretations. Can anthropology and ethnography rehabilitate archaeology, given their shared origins in the colonial past? To what extent can we use ethnographic analogies in archaeological research? As I argue in the following paragraphs, unless we recognize the inherent biases in socio-cultural anthropology and ethnography, they can in fact fuel ethnocentric interpretations of kinship in past societies.

Critical discourse surrounding anthropology in recent years has exposed that at the core of the discipline lies the study of the inferior Other by western observers, itself a construct of European-colonial discourse (McNiven and Russell 2005, 3 with references). Moreover, the labelling of indigenous societies in ethnographic parallels as ancient has helped to legitimize colonial settlement of native lands (McNiven and Russell 2005, 4 with references). In a postcolonial era, therefore, 'colonial discourse' takes the form of knowledge about non-Western cultures which is generated and controlled by Western power as a way of legitimizing colonial control (Moro-Abadía 2006, 6–7). Critical discussion concerning the use of ethnographic analogies in archaeology has also challenged on epistemological and moral grounds the practice of using the present of one society to interpret the past of another which is geographically and culturally remote. Other criticisms have challenged the objectivity of ethnographic reports, which occasionally were produced by dubious narrators and are coloured by ethnocentric biases (Gosden 1999, 9). The hypotheses, therefore, that rely on ethnographic data often serve to corroborate ethnographers' remarks (Currie 2016, 90).

Evolutionism (inextricably linked to colonialism) has also left its stigma on anthropology. Colonial ethnography and evolutionary theory converged as Western societies saw themselves as the product of a historical process, whereas exotic people were viewed as relics of earlier stages, an idea that was readily adopted by archaeologists in the early twentieth century (Gossellain 2016, 218). With the growth of ethnoarchaeology, archaeologists continue to seek appropriate contexts for testing hypotheses about prehistoric behaviour and, among others, the hunter-gatherers have been treated as Stone Age fossils, regardless of the conditions under which they lived (Gossellain 2016, 219). Ethnoarchaeology, therefore, has been criticized for its evolutionary and racist ideology which equates indigenous societies to ancient societies that constitute the subject of archaeological inquiry (Cunningham and McGeough 2018, 162).

Ethnocentrism is another recognized limitation of anthropology as it is taken for granted that certain norms and institutions of western culture constitute universals, which also applies to kinship. With reference to kinship, for example, it has been assumed by anthropologists that it is based on sexual procreation, as is the case in European culture. It has been revealed, however, that in some cultures sexual intercourse is not connected to procreation (Carsten 2023). It follows, therefore, that even anthropological research lacks analytic consistency in the way kinship is compared cross-culturally.

Returning to the article, the author uses several ethnographic examples to exemplify how matrilineal forms of descent correspond to ethnographic documentation with reference also to the *Ethnographic Atlas* by Murdock (1967). As discussed above, however, ethnography carries inherent limitations and cannot, therefore, be considered as a litmus test for the otherwise acknowledged biases in archaeology. For example, anthropologists have challenged Murdock's *Ethnographic Atlas* from which parallels were drawn regarding kinship forms and ancient dwellings (e.g., Ember 1973). It has been argued that their data were collected over a 60-year period (1890–1950) by different anthropologists, some of which were not even professionals (Wotela and Moultire 2008, 9–10). Other criticisms concern Murdock's formulae, as in the case of calculating subsistence of animal husbandry on the weight of the food and not on its nutritional value (Wotela and Moultrie 2008, 10 with references).

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Archaeologists have also expressed concerns for the selective reference to ethnographic analogues to deduce conclusions about past societies (Orme 1981, 27). Gender archaeology, in particular, has exposed the androcentric biases in ethnographic models (Nelson 1997, 116) which assume universal patterns of labour division at the expense of women (Rice 1991, 440; Wright 1991, 198). The author also suggests that matrilineal descent and inheritance of land existed in Neolithic Europe because gathering in hunter-gatherer-forager societies is a female activity. We should not forget, however, that the models 'man the hunter' and 'woman the gatherer' have been revised in recent years and the validity of ethnographically informed models of gender division of labour, which deny women's contribution to hunting, have been questioned on archaeological grounds (e.g., Sussman 1999, Haas et al. 2020).

Lastly, the author argues for the usefulness of the anthropological concept of 'house societies' to analyse the archaeological remains of dwellings, and of ethnographic parallels that link matrilocal descent with residence. Archaeologists, however, have questioned their ability to calculate house-floor areas, as architectural remains are affected by factors such as multiple construction, reuse and remodelling, or the use of open spaces as domestic living areas (Schillaci and Stojanowski 2002, 353; Mina 2015, 185).

Conclusion

Sociocultural anthropology, ethnography and archaeology share a similar history founded on imperialist and evolutionary ideology, according to which western society was authenticated through the contrast with what is perceived as remote chronologically, geographically, or culturally. Acknowledging these limitations in archaeology is essential when considering kinship, as is a critical and prudent attitude towards anthropological and ethnographic parallels. As a concluding thought, recent archaeological research challenges the conflation between kinship and genetic relatedness (Bentley 2022, 148 with references), which suggests that archaeology can help unlock kinship in past societies independently.

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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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