

On the Patriarchal Transformation of Matricentric Cultures

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To begin with I will make a few remarks concerning my own position. I have researched the field of pre-patriarchal early cultures and contemporary matricentric tribal cultures for decades. Because of this I put great emphasis on not talking of 'matriarchal' but 'matricentric' societies, because the term 'matriarchy' is often connected to false ideas. In matricentric cultures, women have no 'dominance', nor are men discriminated against. Women's central influence in these cultures is based on a concept of the world held by humans close to nature, who see the key to life in the hands of women, who worship the visible female creative powers and project this into the cosmos. There is a certain superiority of women in religious and social affairs within these groups which stems from the belief in large mother goddesses and the authority of tribal mothers.

These scientific findings are the conceptual basis of the search for a balanced future society with a reciprocal division of labour between the sexes in all areas of social life. This does not purport a nostalgic revival of matricentric systems including the suppression of their tragic aspects (i.e. cults of sacrifice). However, the fact that the order of peace is at the very centre of all unwritten law in matricentric cultures - be it within or between groups or between man and nature - may give us valuable stimuli for finding a way around the impasses of late patriarchal civilizations.

I note the esoteric forms of revivals of 'feminine spirituality' with reserve. On one hand, the expression as such seems to me to be misleading; matricentric spirituality and religion were always shared between the sexes. On the other hand I believe that a forward-looking spirituality should in no way be bound to any anthropocentric projections into divine transcendence. The central idea here is much more focused on the

reverence of life and a human spirituality fed by the sources of universal, emotionally founded ethics.

Following is a brief summary of research in the history of civilizations. The cultural upheaval observed in the later Neolithic period took place on several levels: the mythological-symbolical, the political, and the sociological-familiar. In all three areas, the change was accompanied by violence. In the mythological-religious transformation process, new masculine gods either pushed the great feminine divinities into the abyss or changed the mother goddesses who could not be eradicated into daughters or wives of the newly proclaimed father gods.

The political transformation of these peaceful matricentric cultures paralleled their military occupation. The structure of rule built on warrior aristocracy not only created a hierarchical order between the victors and the conquered, but later led to a patriarchal tribe and family structure with a far-reaching deprivation of rights of women.

The most persistent change happened within the system of symbols and thinking which transformed the originally unified picture of the cosmos and its cyclic processes into a dualistic world view. This polarization between heaven and earth, and the masculine spirit and feminine nature, justified patriarchal rule. The natural and inevitable or God-given dominance of man was proclaimed, and any society that was not patriarchal was regarded as primitive and chaotic. In other words, the existence of matricentric cultures and their well-ordered societies was denied. There is no tyranny without lying.

I deem it essential to keep in mind the complexity of such radical cultural change in order to avoid mono-causal explanations for it. Most research into this widespread cultural change gives two main reasons for its occurrence. The primary reason is the catastrophic climatic change that spurred the movements of peoples out of the regions around the Caspian Sea and in the area of the present-day Sahara, where formerly fertile soils became steppe. This forced increasing numbers of ethnic groups to find new farmland. Because the Middle East, the Balkans, and the

Mediterranean countries had already been populated and were at an eminently high level of civilization, warlike clashes occurred and indigenous base-cultures were taken over.

A second reason was the development of new weapons and tools during the Bronze and Iron Ages. The iron plow in particular is said to have led to male dominance in agriculture.

In my book *"Origins And Liberations. A Dissident Theory of Culture"* (1988), I emphasize the psychological background of the male groups striving for dominance. The long-standing migratory movements brought the loss of the collectively managed soil and strengthened the significance of the male members as hunters and warlike defenders of the group.

Once established, the males in the upper class of these new patriarchal cultures had no intention of carrying out any farming or technical work because they had the dependent and enslaved indigenous population to do this. The warrior aristocracy refused to touch any object other than their own weapons. This is amply illustrated when one reads the ancient Sumerian and Greek heroic epics. Military conquests became necessary in order to secure a constant number of slave laborers, particularly women and children, so as to guarantee progeny.

In a certain way, contempt for 'mere labor' as political philosopher *Hannah Arendt* called it, is part of the main pillar of any patriarchal society. This is also true for contemporary patriarchal tribal societies, in which women the world over do the lion's share of all daily work, while the men will devote their time to the prestigious tasks. To this day, the continued separation of domestic and public work in modern industrial states perpetuates a distinction which I have described as a separation of prestigious performance and subordinate routine work.

This hierarchical 'division' of labor does not explain why, in the early patriarchal advanced cultures or in colonized regions, where elitist upper classes could establish themselves, women who were part of this elite were also generally deprived of their rights despite the fact that they were allowed to partake of the benefits of domestic slaves' services. It is here that a different

but equally significant psychological factor comes into play - the need of men to control female generative productivity. This can be seen in the institution of monogamous marriage or the male dominated polygynous marriage forms which were created to secure paternity. It can also be seen in men's deeply repressed envy of birth-giving.

In the early matricentric tribes, the biological father was in no way a dominant figure. In fact, it was often not possible to identify him because of the tradition of the 'visiting' marriage with its changing partners or the polyandrous marriage where there are more than one partner in relationship. Instead of a biological father, the mother's brother played a much more important role.

In order to make biological fatherhood dominant, older theories of procreation had to be up-ended. In the heavens the fathers of the gods give birth to children (Zeus/Athena) and on earth the ritual of couvade, the 'male childbed' was widely spread among tribal cultures.

From a matricentric perspective, the main reason for a pregnancy was seen in the generative powers of a woman, and relationship by blood was exclusively between mother and child (because the absent menstrual blood was thought to be the nourishment of the foetus). The patriarchal theory of procreation, on the other hand, claims that the male sperm carries the true creative powers and woman merely is the carrying vessel of the male human seed. (To the present day, the term 'spermatozoon' or 'semen' is incorrect, because it suggests that it represents the whole embryo). Based on this theory, patrilineality in the tribe and the dominant father position in the family become logical. In addition to this, female generative power is debased and stigmatized as being 'unclean'. This attitude contributed to contempt of women and the practice of raping women as part of the spoils of war.

Thus male societies turned the original adversity of war into a virtue, and on their path of war-glorification, they left a trail of murder, looting and pillage, and rape. Surely there must be less violent transitions from the matrilineal, avuncular, or

bilateral reckoning to the patrilineal. In such societies, we note the tendency of particularly powerful men exerting their influence on their own children and to pass on their inheritance to their sons. In any case strictly monogamous marriages were always associated with enforced control over women and daughters.

In religion, women were pushed from the priesthood by force. Originally, the office of high priestess for a goddess had always been reserved for a woman, though men were not excluded from religious offices. In fact, we find male shamans next to female in all matricentric cultures right up to the time when men created their own monopoly.

In order to bolster their religious legitimacy, legends about the killing of priestesses or stealing of religious objects were maintained by male societies. Even today, women can be threatened with severe punishment if they enter a religious man's house. In all so-called advanced religions the highest priesthood offices are always held by men. In many cases, women are completely excluded from priesthood, as is still the case today in the Catholic Church.

Contemporary sociology has found that the patriarchal state does not emerge from the family, but from male society (*R. Thurnwald*). In other words, rule and the formation of an oppressive system are a secondary patriarchal invention, and not the only possible strategy to cope with chaotic circumstances, as was maintained for a long time. The pre-patriarchal advanced cultures of the Mediterranean were well-ordered societies based on sacred traditions and ritually protected taboos, and they did not require military means.

Historically, patriarchal cultures have always had to deal with conflicts between religious and secular power, but essentially the two support each other. For example, theologians never tire of disparaging female power as sinful and unclean, nor of classifying female intelligence and willpower as inferior. For their part, secular leaders never refrain from making use of religious symbolism in order to justify their acts of violence.

In my illustrated book *From Divine Lioness to the Significance of Male Power* (1993) I demonstrate how originally sacral symbols were reinterpreted as signs of tyranny. This happened to astral and animal symbols as well as to sacral objects (e.g. flashes as a divine omen or the double axe as a moon-sceptre) were transformed into punishing weapons.

In my illustrated book *Good and Evil. Mythological Backgrounds of Fundamentalism* (2004) I use the figure of the dragon-slayer as a prototype for the patriarchal system of thinking and values. We meet him in the archangel Michael as the fighter of light against darkness and as God's executioner on doomsday. He is also St. George symbolically slaying the dragon but later misused to summon the crusades against Moors, Jews and unbelievers all over the world. Without these models, European colonial history would not have run such a bloody course and there would not have been so great an annihilation of so many significant cultures in the name of Christianity and the white civilisation.

While pre-Christian dragon-slayers kill goddesses in the shape of alleged monsters - such as the sphinx, the female gryphon, or dragon (all of which were originally cosmic symbols) - the prominent female figure in Christian iconography is Our Lady putting her foot on the snake like the male heroes. This mirrors the distorted patriarchal image of woman that puts the 'pure maid of the lord' above the sinful Eve. It was not by chance that the golden age of Mariolatry coincided with the witch-hunts towards the close of the Middle Ages.

Ever since *Francis Bacon*, founder of experimental natural science, the Euro-American imagination has been dominated by the vision of 'superman' as the successor of the dragon-slayer. While 'supermen', as Bacon used to call them, were the guarantors of the dawning 'male era' in which the new scientists would subjugate nature, they are still wandering around our science-fiction and horror movies today. These supermen still appear as the invincible leading male heroes which exterminate the hackneyed monsters of mythology.

An overview of more contemporary movements reveals a continuing bias towards patriarchy. For example, the French Revolution did not change the dualistic allocation of roles between the sexes and in fact, withheld social emancipation from women. The simultaneous occurrence of the industrial revolution and the advances in the natural sciences intensified this dualistic world view. Science widened the gulf between mind and matter, and industrialization finally separated the fields of domesticity and working life.

Even though the counter-movement of Romanticism espoused the cause of an androgynous attitude of mind, it ultimately led to a new myth of the sexes. Notwithstanding that philosopher *Friedrich Schleiermacher* encouraged women to use their intellect, men continued to attribute altruistic instincts to women and equality for women remained illusory. The romantic super-exaltation of woman as partly practiced back in the Middle Ages brought an even larger burden, and turned woman into what I term the 'slave mother'. Woman was made responsible for emotional and moral common sense, which means that she was expected to be spiritually stronger than man while at the very same time she was subject to political and domestic male domination as the servile maidservant.

In the face of such psychological inconsistencies in the patriarchal ideology of the sexes, it is not surprising that the push forward to get at the philosophical and psychological roots of patriarchy remained a Sisyphean task for both the first and the second women's movement in Europe. This is why there are two opposing wings in feminist movements which are quite independent of any political left-right definition. One wing is banking on a resolute equality for women in terms of payment of work and filling key positions in politics and economy. All too often, however, the price tag attached to these truly natural demands is an adaptation to the male style of leadership with its ruthless power games, and a readiness to handle guns in the military to do a 'man's duty'.

The women of the other wing insist on their own perceptions and their female experience of life and refuse to adopt the male ideology of managerial superiority and male competitiveness. The

price they pay often consists of retreating from public office and escaping into a female-spiritual world.

This segmentation of the feminist movement paralyzes the energies needed for pushing the demand for justice and the simultaneous deconstruction of the patriarchal system of thinking. This means that the lucid insights gained by the feminist critics of theology and science as well as the analysis of feminist sociology are hardly utilized by young women because they are tired of the constant collateral skirmishes. As a result the old boy's networks grow stronger again.

Today we are faced with a whole host of highly disturbing developments which seem to have nothing to do with each other but are inextricably intertwined with patriarchy and the suppression of women. They include a fatal demographic imbalance, mass unemployment, impoverishment particularly in the developing world, global ecological problems, and not least, a new justification of preventive war by the United States.

Overpopulation in the developing countries is based on enforced patriarchal morals that bar women's access to birth control, something that all matricentric societies knew how to do and still do today. The increase in the proportion of elderly people in the western industrial countries must be seen in connection with the fact that these countries have indeed taken the first step towards female emancipation but not the second. This second step would empower women to combine motherhood and career. In Addition, the rearing of children now comes with a considerable risk of poverty in the context of the neoliberal (neoconservative) economic system. Strictly speaking the definition of the 'homo oeconomicus', who exclusively struggles for profit only regards the male part of the society while the female human does not fit this definition. How else can you explain neo-liberal politicians who oppose the delegation of social responsibilities to the state, claiming that they need to be re-privatized? This means nothing else than putting that burden on the shoulders of women again. In this way, the system exposes itself by demanding free development

for everyone, but failing to prove able to sustain its own vital and continued existence.

Similar contradictions can be seen in all other interpersonal relationships and in dealing with nature. Thus it is left to adolescent consumers to resist advertising that promotes addictive behaviour; it is left to housewives to refrain from buying ecologically harmful products, while all the time the free market can make such offers with impunity.

And even in academic activity, increasingly linked with economy, there is a type of moral schizophrenia. The demand is for unlimited liberty in research for all technological and biotechnical innovation while at the same time no one wants to be responsible for the impact of this research. Female scientists are increasingly sucked into career paths that blind them for any social, ecological, and global context. It is a very alarming fact that over 40% of all scientists globally work for military research and its ramifications. This goes a long way towards explaining the fact that the supermen among western politicians, in their pretension to imperial power, have been making preventative war socially acceptable again, just as if there had never been a peace movement.

The fact that this disastrous development in the U.S.A. is modeled on religious fundamentalism is openly declared by President George W. Bush in his calling for a crusade of 'the' good against 'the' evil. Now 'the' evil does not exist, not in nature and not in any given culture. It is only man himself who performs destructive acts once he cannot find a useful place in the society.

The only possible way to overcome the phantom of the patriarchal dragon-slayer is by replacing the glorification of power with the love for life. My counterimage to the warrior is the 'carrier of life' as represented by the Christian version of Saint Christopher: A man in full possession of his faculties carries a child across the river of death to the other bank in order to ensure a future generation. This illustration of the renewal of life, as symbolized in the greening staff carried in the hands of

vegetation heroes, makes man as father equal to woman as mother. It is solely in this equality that I can see a hopeful forward-looking vision.

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