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The Principles of Sustainable Societies: Matriarchy as an Alternative Paradigm

A word at the beginning

Most discussions about sustainability focus on a sustainable economy, and the question of what a sustainable society would look like is not raised. Moreover, the fact that the economy is not independent from the form of the society is ignored. However, the most important factor in each society are humans since, through the economy, they are largely responsible for changing the Earth, be it for the better or from bad to worse. It is thus crucial which model of society people have in mind.

Here we can see the necessary connection between economy and research into cultures. Today, it is of utmost importance that we learn from sustainable societies; that means the matriarchal, egalitarian form of society which is based on the maternal gift economy. In matriarchal societies the basic group of life, mothers-children-Earth, is respected. This is valid in all existing indigenous matriarchal societies, where motherhood as the basic group of mothers-children-Earth is transformed into a culture that maintains the balance between genders, generations, and humans and Nature.

Let us have a closer look at this.

Matriarchies as mother-centered societies

Matriarchies are not just a reversal of patriarchy with women ruling over men – as the usual misinterpretation would have it. Matriarchies are mother-centered societies because they respect motherhood as the most important function in society. They are based on maternal values which have been taken from the behavior of the prototypical mother: a nurturing, care-taking, integrative attitude, mutual assistance, perfect balance, conflict resolution through negotiation, and peace building. These values hold for everybody: for mothers and also for those who are not mothers, and for women and men alike.

Matriarchal societies are consciously built upon maternal values and the work carried out by mothers, and this is why they are much more realistic than

patriarchies. They are, on principle, needs-oriented. Their precepts aim to meet everyone's needs with the greatest benefit. Therefore, in matriarchies, motherhood – which originates as a biological fact – is transformed into a *cultural model*.

Maternal values pervade all areas of a matriarchal society and can be observed at all levels: at the social, economic, political, and also cultural level.

At the social level, matriarchal societies are based on the clan, which is led by the eldest clan mother. All clan members are her daughters and sons, and her grandchildren; they live together in a large kinship group formed according to the principles of *matrilineality* and *matrilocality*. These principles put mothers at the center, and they guide their clans without ruling, by integrating the diversity of gender, age, abilities, and needs of the clan members.

In order to achieve social relationships among the clans of a village or town, complex marriage conventions have been developed that link them in mutually beneficial ways. This creates a society where each community sees itself as a big clan, so that everybody is a “mother” or “sister” or “brother” to everybody else. These relationships represent a mutual assistance system where there is no need for help granted from above. In this way a non-hierarchical, horizontal society of matrilineal kinship is created.

However, they perceive this order not in terms of sociology, but of spirituality. In other words, they see maternal values as spiritual principles that humans take from nature. “Mother Nature is our teacher” say the matriarchal Minangkabau people of Sumatra. Mother Nature cares for all her children: plants, animals, humans, however different they may be. The same applies for the prototypical mother: she cares for all her children, embracing their diversity. We can see that, through this concept, matriarchal people base their society on the elemental group of life: mothers-children-Earth.

The social order based on motherhood includes far-reaching consequences for *the economic level*. A matriarchal economy is a subsistence economy. There is no such thing as private property, and there are no territorial claims. The people simply have usage rights to the soil they till, or to the pastures their animals graze. The spiritual idea behind this is that Mother Earth cannot be owned or divided up into parts. She gives the fruits of the fields and the young animals to all people as an unceasing flow of gifts.

In matriarchies, women hold the power over the arrangement of goods and clan houses, and especially over the sources of nourishment. All goods are put into the hands of the clan mother, the matriarch: the harvest and herding products, the goods from the men's hunting and fishing, the goods from handicrafts, and special goods acquired by the men by trading. However, this is an economy of distribution, not of accumulation and possession, and everybody trusts that the

eldest mother – the mother of all clan members – will distribute the goods equally among her children and grand-children. She is responsible for the sustenance and protection of all clan members.

Again, this is not perceived as an economic idea but a spiritual one. The matriarch acts just as Mother Nature does: Nature gives in abundance to all her beings, and so the matriarch gives to all her children to ensure a good life; she nurtures and cares for everybody according to need, not according to merit.

These principles of sharing and giving are not reserved for the clan but extended to the whole community of a village or town. At the seasonal festivals, clans that are comparatively better off will invite all the inhabitants to be their guests and will give away their goods as gifts to their neighbors. This goes round in the village from one festival to the next. At these opportunities, the matriarchs appear in their most beautiful costumes, loaded with gifts which they give away lavishly. By redistributing wealth in this way no-one stays poor.

It is a mutual support system, well-balanced in itself, but it is not seen merely as a profane economic arrangement but rather as a spiritual system. At these gift-giving festivals, the matriarchs are seen as the daughters of Mother Earth, and they act in the same way as the Earth. Again we can see that the economy, following Mother Nature, is also based on the model of mothers-children-Earth.

Since this is the general attitude, a matriarchal economy can be called a “gift economy” in its true sense, as Genevieve Vaughan has formulated it in her theory. And it goes without saying that such an economy is perfectly sustainable, because exploitation is not necessary to enrich an upper class.

Maternal values also permeate *the political level*. The patterns at this level follow the principle of consensus, which means unanimity regarding each decision. To live by a principle like this in practice, a society must be specifically organized, and matriarchal societies are organized into a system of councils which are intertwined in a sophisticated network. Matrilineal kinship lines are, once again, the starting point. The basis of each decision-making process is the clan house, where the people related along the mother-line live: women and men, elders and young people. This is where the real politics takes place which then influences the larger bodies: the village or town councils and regional councils. These latter councils are meetings of male delegates from the individual clan houses to communicate, discuss and co-ordinate matters, but not to make decisions unilaterally. Therefore, the origin of all politics lies in the clan houses, and in this way a true “grass roots democracy” is put into practice.

In such a political system, no hierarchies and classes and no rulers can develop, as well as no gender or generation gap. Instead, matriarchies are truly egalitarian. Minorities are not excluded by the majority, as is common in our formal “democracies”. In matriarchies, new ideas, considerations, and cultural

inventions cannot be excluded as the thinking of minorities, but can develop because there are no “minorities” and no dictatorship of a “majority”.

The spiritual idea behind this is also learned from Mother Nature, who shows that diversity is the true wealth. Matriarchal people also see it that way: wealth is achieved through a diversity of ideas, knowledge and contributions made to the councils, and this attitude enables them to see the many different aspects of an issue they have to decide on. They reach a consensus through a very creative process in order to obtain a result that suits everybody. The ability to listen, to respect different opinions, and to integrate these follows maternal values, as with the prototypical mother; this ability is demonstrated by women and men equally in the councils. The aim is to solve problems and conflicts by talking and negotiating and to secure peace for mothers, children and Earth.

Of course, this kind of politics is much more sustainable than the politics of oppression from above and revolt from below, as is typical for patriarchal societies. A lot of human abilities, knowledge and good will are lost in that way.

We can see that, at every level, the matriarchal form of society is based on a deep and all-permeating spirituality. *At a cultural level*, this spiritual attitude and the maternal values which are at its core emerge very clearly.

Matriarchal societies do not have hierarchical religions based on an omnipotent male God and a degraded world despised as “profane”. In matriarchies, divinity is immanent, for the whole world is regarded as divine: as feminine divine. There is no split between the sacred and the profane. This is evident in the widely-held concept of the universe as the Great Goddess who brought forth everything through birth, and of the earth as the Great Mother who created all living beings. And everyone, and everything, is endowed with divinity by virtue of being a child of the Great Mother Nature.

As a consequence, all is regarded as interconnected with everything else in the web of beings; nothing is left out. Therefore, no being should be violated because, in doing so, you would be violating yourself, and violating the divine web of the world. Above all Mother Earth should not be hurt, for she could stop being fertile as a result. When humans have to take their food from plants and animals, and have to scratch the earth while sowing, all of these “violations” must be healed. So hunting and harvesting are inevitably followed by ceremonies of healing, through which humans give back goods from their culture as gift to the Earth, such as songs, dances, and poetry, as well as carvings and other kinds of artifacts. In this way, the balance is restored again.

In such a model, ideas of exploiting the earth cannot develop, and they are alien to matriarchal people. Matriarchal people are convinced that practices which damage and destroy Nature will have repercussions for humanity – an idea which is perfectly true.

These ideas and arrangements make matriarchal societies extremely sustainable, so that they – being not at all a fiction or utopia – lived over millennia, and some of them have survived up to the present time. I have shown this in my research which I carried out for decades.

Contrary to this, in patriarchal societies Nature is regarded as “dead matter” and merely a resource to be exploited. Motherhood is made invisible to promote the exploitation of women’s bodies. Let me take this point further: nature and mothers/women are regarded as enemies to the system and must be suppressed by violence. The bond between mothers and children is disturbed and demolished, especially between mothers and daughters, and the bond between humans and Earth is cut, so that most humans today believe in the dualism of civilization versus nature, mind versus body, humans versus the rest of the world.

Of course, societies with such a destructive model of culture lack the ability to build a sustainable way of life. They tend to treat “ecology” as merely a technical matter, thereby prolonging precisely the problem they want to solve. They are blind to the challenging idea that sustainability is, first and foremost, a social and cultural problem. It must be tackled by creating a completely different cultural model, one that puts the basic group of life: mothers-children-Earth, at the center again.

Some last comments

How a modern matriarchal society can be achieved today is demonstrated in the philosophy of Matriarchal Politics. It provides a sweeping vision of this new form of life, starting – without plunging into backward romanticism – with the situation here and now. It definitely implies going beyond this disastrous capitalist patriarchal system.

The pioneers and so-called “critical mass” to change this situation are women. Therefore, the economic wealth of every nation, which is being continuously stolen from them in order to make transnational corporations, the military, and all the ego-maniac endeavors of ruling men big and bigger, must go back to women; that is, to their mother-children-Earth communities and co-operatives and their gifting circles, which are new matriarchal communities in the true sense.

If we want to have a future as a species on this still beautiful, but much demolished planet, women should not beg for this to happen, but step up to create a matriarchal revolution for the best of all humanity. Women are rising up from below against the madness of patriarchy, and are withdrawing their collaboration with it from above.

Because the matriarchal paradigm is not far away from us; we do not have to embrace something alien. We have all internalized maternal values through the love given to us by our own mothers: they nurtured us and cared for us, they integrated us in our families, they always supported us as we took steps into the outside world, and they achieved peace around us, which was necessary for our growth.

We know these values!

And women comprise half of humanity, and even more together with our children, our young daughters and sons, our lovers and husbands, who will support a maternal uprising. Women are the most powerful agents to change the situation; women can stop this entire machine of destruction by ditching it here and now and by starting to create a motherly world.

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