Essay Title: Perspectives on the ‘New Matriarchy’

Who Pounds the Yam?

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ABSTRACT

The title follows on a question I asked at the last debate in July on ‘Re-instating Matriarchy’ in July; which followed a discussion on gender roles in black relationships/families and expectations. The question, “who pounds the yam in your household?” sought to highlight two perspectives – that gender roles are socially constructed; therefore, what is expected in one culture is not necessarily what is expected in another, adding to the point that black culture is not homogenous. The second perspective is the ‘moving forward’ dialectic – that individuals within a relationship need to communicate expectations clearly and to negotiate roles within each unit, as each unit is unique and roles should serve the common good and unify the household.
A NEW MATRIARCHY?

At the aforementioned debate, 96% of the audience voted for a ‘reinstatement’ of matriarchy, as a power system in African communities. I argued that it is important to understand that there is no record of truly unambiguous matriarchal societies (See Adovasio, Soffer and Page, 2007), and only projections exist of how pre-historic societies might have worked in cultures where women owned property and shared equally in political power and work. Cynthia Eller, a popular deconstructivist of the matriarchy myth, insists that it is a romanticist claim by 1970s second-wave feminists led by Marija Gimbutas to legitimise social criticism on women’s rights. (2000, pp. 12-13).

The various definitions of matriarchy that exist encompass the role of mothers, priestesses and older women in defining the conditions of power, production and reproduction in a society. The journalist Margot Adler (2006), and the feminist, Cynthia Eller (2000), observe that none of these definitions pertain to nations, or the role of women in the state and that this is where feminist protestations fail in providing examples that are relevant for today. Recently, the term has been applied to societies that have eventually become hugely egalitarian in gender constructions. In many contexts, systems that offer egalitarian structures (in gender nominations) have been (in my opinion) mistakenly called ‘matriarchal’.

In Anthropology and Feminism, the three kinds of structures that are linked to matriarchy are:

- Matrilineal – where descent is through the female line, as in the case of the Mosuo in south-west China (the largest of matrilineal societies) and the Akan people of Ghana, just to mention two.
• Matrilocal - where the family is situated locally to the woman’s home-town. In this case, men are ‘married out’ of their communities, rather than the other way around. Typical examples include the Vanatinai of Papua New Guinea, the Ngazidja people of Comoros and a few Asian communities in Burma, India, Borneo and Indonesia.

• Matrifocal - a structure that is becoming increasingly common, and which literally means women/mother centred. In this structure, the man is somewhat marginal (if not absent) in the family. This is increasingly the case of a lot of Afro-Caribbean and African American families and emerging black families of the diaspora.

These existing ‘quasi’-matriarchal communities have one very significant difference to patriarchal societies - duties, not roles, are very clearly defined and are consistently negotiated (with the ‘need’ pre-supposing the ‘role’) in such a way that individuals take on duties because there is a need, not because it is their societal prescribed role.

The Musuo people of China are often quoted as a good example of a modern-day matriarchal society, but it is in truth, mostly matrilineal and matrifocal. Since the tribe is very much isolated from the rest of China, its structure remains unopposed by the intrusiveness of general Chinese politic; and women generally leave political office for men as part of its job-sharing understanding. This is not surprising, as historically the Mosuo were feudal and political power rested (as it still rests) with men (Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association, 2006).

For what a ‘re-instatement’ of matriarchy means for the people who voted that day, an
objective definition of black families in the diaspora needs to be presented. Women in a significant number of black families already ‘rule’ their households alone – making important decisions on the day-to-day management of their homes, owning property and increasingly becoming the sole bread-winners. According to Gingerbread (an organisation that works to support the rights of single parents) April – June 2015 review of the ONS statistics on single parenthood, 21% of single parents in the UK are black and 9 out of 10 of the children raised in these homes are raised by the mother. Thus, I disagree with the call to “re-instate” a matriarchal structure (in a manner of speaking), where women ‘take power over men’ in the community. This will put more pressure on a female structure that is already struggling to ‘rule’ alone unless the culture re-defines itself, and male involvement in ensuring equity for women is guaranteed. It is no longer the question of equality, this can be easily negotiated and achieved today, but the issue of black men in black societies of the diaspora making conscious choices that support black women into power. For as long as women are burdened with the task of raising children (alone in the most part) they will never make it to ruling the nation, which is the matriarchy that is needed among black people in the diaspora – (black) women in powerful positions in the state.

CONCLUSION

We need to reframe gender positions in the way that our ancestors did - where roles were assigned in line with the needs of a society, which, in turn enabled the society to move forward. Crucially, our ancestors seemed to be able to allow woman to take the lead when necessary - it was not an issue, and it shouldn't be one today
REFERENCES


